

Katsura Izumi
Hinako Takanaga

The GUILTY vol.1

Verdict 有罪



Yaoi



Novel

"I want you more and more," the man whispered, close enough that his breath brushed Toya's ears. His voice was fascinating and deceptive, sweet enough to intoxicate.

Toya Sakurai has always wanted to get his hands on Kai Hodaka's books before anyone else, so when he is assigned to be the bestselling author's editor, it seems like a dream come true. Kai Hodaka, with a slick face and a sinful voice, is the subject of numerous rumors and gossip, but Toya is more intrigued by the glimpses he sees of the real man behind the stories: quiet, insightful, and with a hidden kindness to him.

So when Hodaka makes a shocking proposal, Toya almost can't believe it: Toya's body, in exchange for Hodaka's manuscript. It begins as a simple business arrangement, but under Hodaka's skillful touch, Toya's defenses crumble, and his simple life begins to spin wildly out of control, leaving him yearning for more.

Enigmatic author...morally bankrupt celebrity...which is the real Kai Hodaka, and will Toya find out before he loses himself entirely?

NOVEL / DRAMA / ROMANCE

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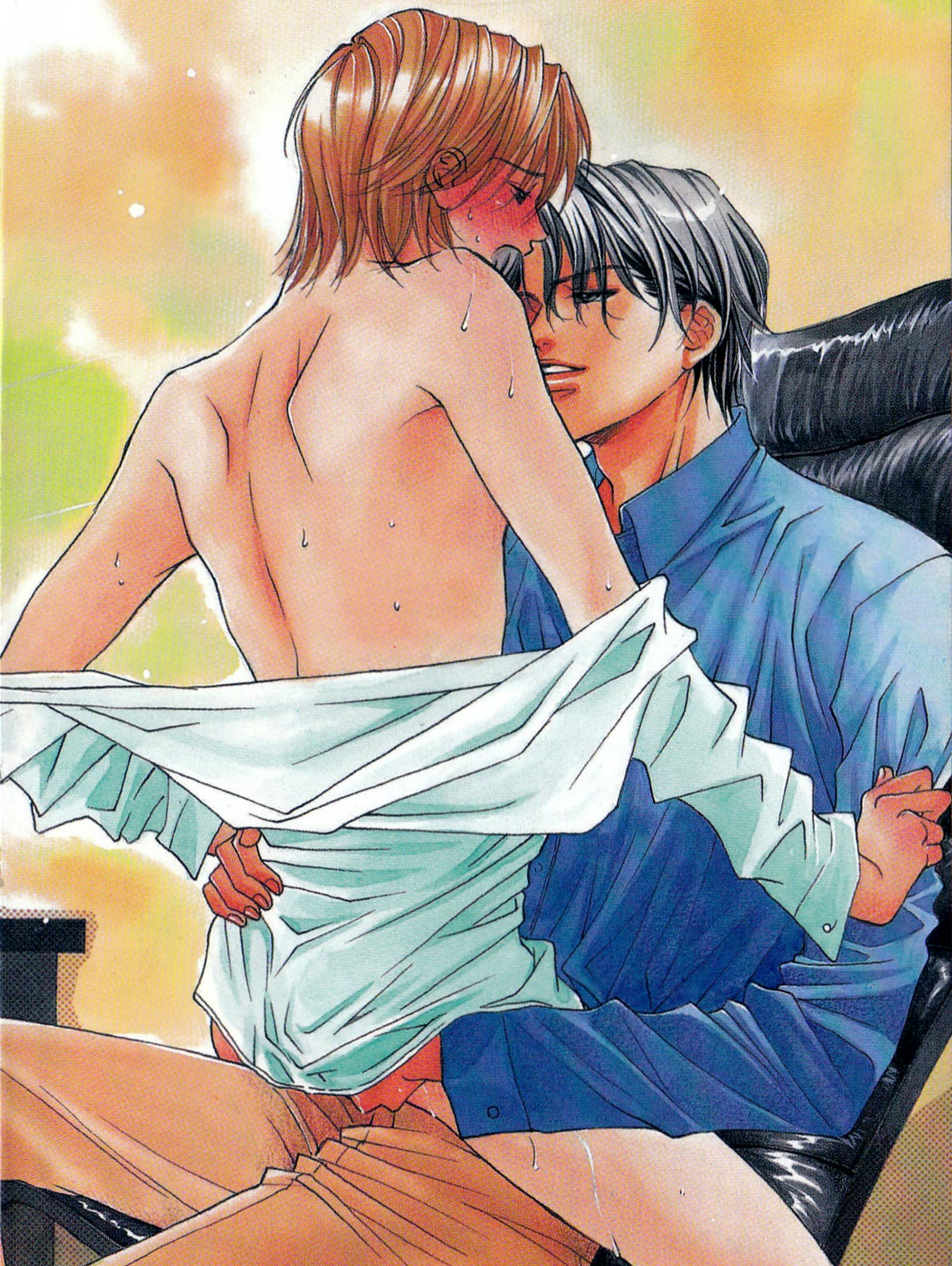


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“His hot, wet flesh welcomed even Hōdaka’s dry finger. But it wasn’t enough, and Toya twitched, squirming over it as if wanting more.”

The GUILTY vol.1 *Verdict* 有罪

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PROFILE

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Lately I've been taking my background research into the bath to read, but I keep dropping it in the water. I try to be careful, but the same thing keeps happening. I'm starting to scare myself.

THE GUILTY Vol.1 - Verdict

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Chapter 1

So many of their authors were night owls that when afternoon came around, the editorial department exploded with life. Most of the authors Toya Sakurai managed, like everybody else, worked best late at night. Maybe it was easier to write about murder then.

Toya's department published a steady stream of mystery novels, which was no doubt what had given him such a silly idea. The same thing accounted for the unsettling words peppering his colleagues' phone conversations: they discussed the best choice of weapons, estimated times of death, and motives for murder.

As much as Toya liked mysteries, the slender-figured, compassionate-looking man wasn't suited to voicing such vicious ideas. His girlfriend Miwa had told him so, and his friends from college had said something similar. Apparently Toya's image didn't quite mesh with this new department he'd been transferred to. Toya's old department had dealt with serious literature. It had been a laid-back environment, and he still wasn't used to the stark differences in the atmosphere here.

The offices of the pulp imprint division of Sozan Publishing were on the eighth floor of a twenty story building, and the main editorial offices of literature and

fiction were next to them. There were no walls on the floor, so the offices were divided up with partitions. But despite the fact that only a single thin wall separated them, the atmosphere of the two departments differed in almost every conceivable way.

"Oh no! This is terrible!" a woman cried at the desk next to Toya. He looked up instinctively.

"What happened?"

"I sent the wrong file to the printers for Mister Furuta's postscript."

That alone didn't seem to Toya to be much of a crisis. Half-sobbing, the woman explained that the proofreaders had made some changes to the postscript which the author had wanted to tweak slightly, and now she had accidentally sent the old file.

"What am I going to do? My life is over."

The project had already been rushing to finish, its release date fast approaching. The woman seemed to be careless in general; she had already forgotten to distribute the ad inserts, and had also forgotten to double-check the wrapper band for misprints. And every single time, she panicked.

"Don't worry. The postscript is short, so the printers can put it in by hand at the press. As long as they check the proofs at the blueprinting stage, everything should be fine."

"You—you think so?"

"Yeah, I'm sure it'll be fine. You should tell Mister Furuta, too. I'm sure he won't be upset."

"Okay. I'll let him know."

With one problem solved, another loomed as the

phone on Toya's desk screamed for attention.

Running his fingers through his dark brown hair, illuminated by the late afternoon sun, Toya picked up the phone. His desk was on the western side of the building and got a little too much sunlight shining through the blinds. It often stung Toya's sensitive eyes. "Hello, pulp imprint division."

"This is Hodaka."

The voice of a man he didn't recognize tickled at his ears, giving Toya a momentary jolt that stopped his hand.

"I'm calling for Mister Makihara."

The speaker's smooth, melancholy tenor had a harsh edge to it, as well as a touch of honey. Its redolent tones lingered in Toya's ears, threatening to sweep him away. It was that sort of voice.

"Hello?"

"Uh, excuse me. I'll transfer you."

Toya shook his head, though the man couldn't possibly have seen it, surprised at his momentary reverie. He pressed the hold button with a slender finger and called over to Makihara that someone named Hodaka was on the line for him.

Toya gasped.

Hodaka...as in Kai Hodaka?!

His heart pounded against his ribs as soon as he realized, but he managed to conceal his excitement.

"Thanks," Makihara, the assistant editor, said cheerily, and picked up the phone as if it were the most natural thing in the world for Kai Hodaka to call him.

Toya made sure the call was transferred

correctly, then let out a deep sigh. He looked at the poster for Sozan Novels, the main label of the pulp imprint, hanging at the front of the office. His eyes fell on the photo of Kai Hodaka, who seemed to be gazing at him languidly from the poster.

Hodaka was a handsome man: his photo alone was enough to make Toya blush. Kai Hodaka was his real name, too, not a pen name. It sounded almost scripted, but it was perfect for him. He was good-looking and talented, a best-selling mystery author who broke records with every book, and now Toya knew that even his voice was amazing. That description made Hodaka sound like the perfect man, a threat to men everywhere. But Toya would have trouble saying that himself, since he had been a fan of Hodaka's for so long.

Yoshimi Fujiwara, a part-timer with the department, was sitting next to him preparing review copies for shipping when she noticed he was acting strangely. "You're spacing out, Toya. Is something wrong?"

"I just took a call from Kai Hodaka. I've never talked to him before. I guess I was a little star-struck."

"Really? You looked totally fine. You mean a big grown-up man like you gets nervous, too?" There was a note of humor in Yoshimi's voice, but she wasn't making fun of him.

"I've been a fan of his for a long time. I had no idea he had such an incredible voice."

"It really is amazing, isn't it? I bet a lot of women have met their doom in that voice. And it's even better in person. On the phone, it sounds like he's

whispering into your ear, so it's really powerful, but it's ten times better in real life."

She went on to tell him about a girl who had worked at the office part-time and had gotten involved with Hodaka after taking a phone call from him.

"Yeah, I can't blame her."

"She was just a regular girl. You never would have expected her to get together with Kai Hodaka. He's a real playboy, and he doesn't hold back from a good time. You even see him in the tabloids sometimes."

Yoshimi's negative description didn't mesh with Toya's image of Hodaka. There was nothing sleazy in the sophisticated good looks he saw in Hodaka's photograph—if anything, he looked pensive. Hodaka would know how to enjoy himself in an adult way. He would never engage in such tacky, immature behavior.

Toya knew he was building Hodaka up too much in his mind, and he smiled ruefully.

"Well, anyway, we'll get to meet Mister Hodaka next week, at the party for the Uchiyama Prize."

"Oh, is he attending? That's one reason to look forward to it, then."

The Shujiro Uchiyama prize was given to a mystery novelist each year around this time. Sozan Publishing had created the award and always held a ceremony to announce the winner, followed by a party. Toya had gone twice before, but he didn't think Hodaka had attended either of those times.

"I hear the food at this year's hotel is really great, too."

Toya grunted a reply, then looked back down at

the manuscript he had been reading. If he finished the work today, they would be able to finalize the proofs tomorrow. Then the covers for next month's new releases would come up for color checking, and he would have to review those, too.

Toya had been engrossed in the manuscript for a while when he happened to look up and caught sight of a woman walking by on the other side of the partition. She was wearing a visitor's badge. She recognized Toya and waved happily.

"Miss Hara." A smile came over Toya's face as he stood and walked to where she waited in the hall.

"Hello, Mister Sakurai."

"It's been too long. Did you have a meeting today?"

"I did. How's your new department going for you?"

"Thank you for asking. I'm finally starting to get a handle on it."

Sozan Publishing had been Toya's first job after graduation. When he'd first joined, he'd been assigned to the main imprint's division, handling works of literature and fiction. At the time, he'd convinced himself that he would probably always be stuck in serious literature, but in June he had suddenly been transferred to his current post in the department that handled mysteries, which was where he'd wanted to be all along. It had been a stroke of unexpected good luck that came just when he was on the verge of giving up, but because it took such a long time for transfers to be processed, in reality he hadn't been working in this department for very long at all.

He had been Hara's editor during his entire stay in the literature department. She was the first newly published author that Toya had worked with. She had just published something new this month and, though it was nothing special, it was selling steadily.

"Tanaka took over for me and he's a big fan of yours. I think you'll get along."

"But it feels so strange not having you there. You've been taking care of me since I debuted. I know it's just part of the business, but it's been tough getting used to it." Toya knew Hara was older than him, and couldn't help thinking her response was a bit childish.

Toya still thought back fondly on how the two of them had learned the ropes together, when he was still a fresh recruit who didn't have the first clue what he was doing in the company. But in a major publishing company, personnel transfers and shuffling of editorial teams were standard operating procedure. Hara and her new editor had no choice but to get along.

"It'll be fine. You've always been dedicated to your work. I'm looking forward to reading your next book."

Toya's words and gentle smile seemed to pacify Hara.

"Thanks for your encouragement, Mister Sakurai."

Her new work wasn't his style, but Toya still wanted to read it. He wanted to support her however he could, even if it was only in a trivial way.

Toya's apartment was enveloped in silent darkness.

It was after one a.m. He had come home on the last train. His routine was to have a snack and go to bed, then get back to the office the next day a little after noon.

Toya yawned. Looking up from the sink in his cramped bathroom, he noticed the fatigue reflected on the face in the mirror.

People told him he was handsome. His pale eyes, shaped by the European fold of his eyelids, lacked any shrewdness and resulted in a gentle, naïve look. He would never be able to pull off the disaffected look Hodaka had in that photo; it would look all wrong.

Today had been another exhausting day at work. One of his authors had asked for a couple of days' extension on his deadline, but that much was normal. In the new department, the authors he had been assigned were all over-achievers. They never missed their deadlines by much.

He was almost getting bored, but it would have been a little ungrateful to say so. Toya smiled at the thought of his colleagues in the comics and periodicals departments who constantly had to pull all-nighters.

As opposed to his previous department, which had been obsessed with hardcover editions and magazines, paperbacks were the backbone of his current department. At first he had been confused by the differences in format and printing houses, but he would get used to it.

Toya's mouth gaped wide in an even bigger

yawn and he plopped down on his single bed.

He had rented this studio about six months after he started working. It had been clear even then that the job would require odd hours, and if he'd commuted from his parents' house inside the city it would have started to bother them. His mother had been dead-set against her only son living by himself, but there was no reason for him to stay at his parents' house forever. Besides, at some point in college he had decided that staying at home once he was an adult was not for him.

His huge bookshelf had a commanding presence in his tiny room, with twenty of Hodaka's books lined up on one shelf.

He'd left the better part of his collection at home, but lately he was having trouble finding places for the new books that he bought and he often had to get rid of old ones. But these books of Hodaka's were different. He had tried to pick only those he liked best and to leave the rest behind, but before three months had gone by, he'd replaced all the ones he was missing.

The astonishing voice he'd heard earlier that day still echoed in his mind. Toya's eardrums still seemed to tingle with a shadow of his voice. But the more he tried to focus on it, the more the wonderful voice faded from memory.

It was so stupid to get nervous at the sound of someone's voice. Besides, it didn't make sense for Toya to get so panicky just hearing Hodaka's voice when he had taken this job with a much higher goal in mind.

Kai Hodaka was more important to Toya than any other author.

Toya had often been sick as a child, so he hadn't fit in very easily with his classmates and was quieter than most people. No one played with him at recess. Instead, he would sit alone in a corner of the classroom with his teacher, who showed him the joy of reading. With a book in hand, the long hours he spent in the waiting room at the doctor's office didn't bother him. He was swallowed up by the worlds of his books.

When his health returned to normal in high school, his quiet personality and good looks made him popular with girls, and he made friends. His classmates often relied on him and discussed their problems with him because of his friendliness, and his air of intelligence and maturity. It was around that time that a friend recommended mystery novels to him, and he picked them up. He especially liked Western authors.

But at the time, reading was just a hobby for Toya, not something that would affect his life plans. His father, who worked in a bank, had had an influence on him, and even if it wasn't exactly his taste, he planned to get a job in banking or finance. When he began college, he majored in economics.

Then one day Toya found one of Hodaka's books.

The elaborate twists, the high entertainment value, and the penetrating descriptions of character all set his stories apart. After reading just one book, Toya felt confident treating it as a work of literature. Hodaka had universal appeal; he was always among the top-selling authors, and his works served as a representative of their times.

Clichéd as it was to say so, Hodaka and his good looks had turned the world of crime fiction on its head with his debut. But a pretty face couldn't write a novel. It annoyed Toya that people celebrated him as an author for such a stupid reason, but that hadn't stopped him from buying Hodaka's debut novel.

It would be no exaggeration to say that that was the day that changed his life.

Toya had expected to spend his life quietly, with the mild complacency of a cow, but he was so swept away by Hodaka's work that he changed the course of his life. He wanted to get his hands on Hodaka's books before anyone else. For a while, he thought he could work at a book distributor or a printing company. Working for a publisher had seemed impossible.

Hodaka had helped to make Toya what he was now. Toya hadn't cared what job he took, as long as it would let him work with Hodaka someday. It was his dream.

Of course he knew that life was more complicated than that. His dream wouldn't just come true. But as long as he was willing to work toward it, it couldn't hurt to have a dream.

"Oh yeah."

He couldn't forget the most important chore of the day before he took his bath.

Toya got out his cell phone and selected the address of his fiancée Miwa Okamura. He started to type out an email to her.

He told her that he had taken a phone call from Hodaka today, but then got stuck for how to finish. He

wrote, "I wish I could hear your voice sometimes, too." He could have written "I love you" or something like that, like a boyfriend should have, but Toya wasn't good at directly stating his feelings like that.

He remembered Miwa's striking face, with its big round eyes, and Toya smiled despite himself. He felt Miwa was the only one who could ever warm his heart like this. But he wasn't certain.

The Shujiro Uchiyama Prize ceremony and the party that followed were the two biggest events of the year at Sozan Publishing. They rented the biggest banquet room at the Hibiya Hotel for it.

The party after the award ceremony was a who's who of authors and industry people, the guests ranging from big name authors to the newly published. Women from the night clubs in this neighborhood had also shrewdly mixed with the crowd, searching out the rich and influential to come by their bars after the party.

Toya had carried out the majority of his responsibilities at the party just by greeting the authors he managed and other people he recognized. That meant he could turn his attention to looking for Hodaka.

But it wouldn't be polite for an editor to openly seek out a specific person to talk to, and even in a crowd like this Toya could draw attention to himself. He had to act discreetly.

Pretending he had some business to take care of, he began his search for Hodaka. And although he found

other luminaries of the mystery novel and young authors of women's literature, the one person he wanted to find was missing.

"Hey, Sakurai. Have you said hello to all the authors you manage? There are a few you've never seen before, right?"

Toya's roving gaze was stopped short by his sharp-eyed boss, Makihara, coming up to him. Makihara was no doubt trying to help Toya, since he was still new to the department. Of course Toya had managed that trivial task on his own, but he didn't find Makihara's concern for him overbearing. It was necessary to respect those in higher positions as they deserved.

"Yes, I saw them all. By the way, is Mister Hodaka here today?" Toya casually switched the topic. He figured that as Hodaka's editor, Makihara would probably know.

"I haven't seen him. He'd have to go through reception to get here, though, so you could try asking them if you need him for something."

"That sounds like the best way."

"You're a fan of Hodaka's, aren't you? If you find him, I'll introduce you."

"Thank you."

Toya moved away from Makihara. His eyes swept the room, a deep devotion coloring them, but he didn't see Hodaka anywhere.

He had been sure today was the day he would meet Hodaka, but it looked like he had been wrong. Normally, he would see the wisdom of giving up at this point, but this was a chance to see Hodaka, and

that changed everything. Finally, Toya went back to the reception desk like Makihara had suggested.

Smirking at his own refusal to give up, he headed out of the banquet room. Just then, a woman in front of him caught her foot in her long dress and stumbled.

Her elbow struck Toya hard in the chest, and he staggered back several steps. He bumped into someone behind him.

"I'm so sorry! Are you all right?"

It was the hard body of a man, and Toya took a step forward to pull away immediately.

"Ouch!" A muttered cry escaped him as his hair yanked at his scalp and pulled him back. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't bother me, but it looks like your hair is caught on one of my buttons."

A deep, beautiful voice whispering behind him tickled Toya's ear drums. Instantly, as if a spell had been cast over him, his body froze. His soul was pierced by the power of the voice. How could a voice like that exist in a world like this?

It felt like the man was leaning forward. A small breath ran past his ear, not unpleasant, and the feeling of it lingered on Toya's skin.

"I'm going to untangle you, so hold still," the man's voice tickled at his ear, more silken than even Kai Hodaka's had been on the phone the other day.

There was arrogance in the voice, but not enough to be irritating, and something sultry and sensual in the memory of it. A woman might have fallen in love just hearing this voice. A bit of an exaggeration, perhaps, but the man's voice was truly captivating.

"You—you can just rip it off." Toya came back to his senses and tried to pull away again, but the man would not allow it.

He gently took both of Toya's arms and pulled him back against his chest, whispering in his ear, "That would hurt your lovely hair. Just hold still."

A stern tone colored his voice, but it still acted like a drug to bring Toya under his spell.

Lovely? He didn't want to hear that from a man, even if he had a beautiful voice.

He started to imagine what the man behind him was like.

Toya realized that the eyes of everyone around them were starting to focus on them and he grew more embarrassed than ever. "That's enough. Please let me go."

"There's no need to struggle like that. Or are you worried that someone in particular will see us?"

"That's none of your business," Toya said with annoyance. Why was it taking so much time to undo a simple button? The guy must have been incredibly clumsy. "If you can't untangle it, please just rip it off. Or we could ask someone to bring some scissors, if you prefer."

His annoyance was evident in the harsh tone of his voice. That was unusual for Toya, who was usually so tolerant.

"If I actually rip the button off, I won't meet the dress code. I'm sure you're feeling uncomfortable, but could you please just hold still?"

Toya was outmaneuvered. From the feel of the

cloth on his hands and neck, he could tell that the man's suit was of very high quality.

"Hodaka!"

Toya heard someone call out from nearby and he cringed. Kai Hodaka must be somewhere nearby. He began to turn his head to look for him, but the man murmured, "Don't move."

"Hey, Hodaka. What's holding you up?" The blithely cheerful voice of a man stopped just beside Toya. In his restricted field of vision, Toya saw only his brown shoes, different from those of the other man's.

"His hair got caught on my button. I'll come by later."

"No rush."

No way.

It took a few seconds for Toya to process their conversation.

"This is a joke—right?" he asked in a hoarse voice, his throat rattling and dry.

"What's a joke?" the man replied, his voice so tranquil it aggravated Toya.

"You're not really Kai Hodaka, are you?"

"Is there a problem if I am?"

Oh no...

Toya couldn't believe that the man he'd been talking to so rudely, the man he was stuck in this situation with, was *the* Kai Hodaka. He was so shocked that he didn't even notice when Hodaka told him he'd untangled his hair.

"Hey," his voice murmured next to his ear, and Toya gave a small cry. He hurried to get away from the man, then turned back to face him.



It was too much to take in all at once. But it really was Kai Hodaka standing there.

He was far more handsome than he looked in his photo. Every part of his face was perfect. His sloping ebony eyes held an intensity that was as unforgettable as the sharp line of his nose. Toya had heard that Hodaka was around thirty-five, but his face epitomized the expression of graceful beauty. His was a captivating manliness.

He looked a couple of inches taller than Toya. Toya was on the tall side, but even he had to look up at Hodaka.

Toya had blundered by not recognizing the man's voice. He remembered being told that Hodaka's voice was even more impressive in person than on the phone, so he had no excuse for not immediately recognizing this man who spoke with such a beautiful voice.

A smile broke over Hodaka's lips and he gently touched Toya's hair. "Sorry about that. Is your hair okay?"

Toya was startled.

The man's voice seemed to curl up against Toya's eardrums, so much more captivating than over the phone.

"It's fine," Toya stammered uncharacteristically, keeping his eyes on the floor. Now that he was actually talking to the man he had wanted to see for so long, he didn't know what to do.

But in contrast to Toya, who was descending into panic, Hodaka was completely at ease, as if what had just happened hadn't bothered him at all. He even

had a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He was looking straight at Toya in utter serenity.

"Your hair is beautiful. It suits your pretty face. I can't bear to think that I damaged something so wonderful."

Toya was struck speechless. It wasn't just that Hodaka dared to say something so off-handedly that other men would have found impossible to utter; but coming from him, it sounded almost natural. Toya had complicated feelings about his own appearance and he didn't know how to respond to being told something like that as if it were perfectly normal, without any trace of a punch line or embarrassment.

"Uh, that's...I mean—"

He wanted to tell Hodaka how much he adored his books, but he was so nervous that the words wouldn't come.

"Hey, Sakurai. Are you bothering Mister Hodaka?"

Makihara had noticed the two of them talking. Toya was relieved to hear his voice.

"Good evening, Mister Makihara."

"Sorry about this guy, Mister Hodaka. This is Sakurai. He just transferred to my department. He's usually pretty easygoing, but it looks like he's really keyed up right now. He's a huge fan of yours."

"That explains it. I was wondering why I didn't recognize such a gorgeous man."

Makihara gave a boisterous laugh at Hodaka's response. "You know Sakurai can't respond to something like that."

Makihara was totally right. People had said before that Toya was “gorgeous”—he had that kind of face. But it was different coming from Hodaka. Toya was too skinny compared to him, and the difference was obvious in their bone structure as well. Toya’s shoulders and hips were lean compared to the power of Hodaka’s.

Toya calmed back down as he listened to Makihara and Hodaka’s polite exchanges. He waited for a break in their conversation, then presented Hodaka with a card. “It was a pleasure meeting you.”

Hodaka glanced at Toya’s card and nodded. “Nice to meet you.”

He took out a silver business card holder and handed one to Toya with an elegant gesture. “I’ll let you two get back to the party.”

“Way to go, Sakurai!” Makihara said, nudging Toya in the ribs. He was gazing vacantly after Hodaka.

“It was awful. I looked like a complete idiot.”

Toya had briefly regained his calm, but now he felt like he was going to get depressed instead.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. He really liked you.”

What? How could he have liked anything about that horribly awkward conversation?

Toya didn’t say any of this, but Makihara seemed to pick up on his hesitation and lowered his voice before continuing.

“Hodaka always acts friendly, but he only gives his card to people he likes. He just tells the rest that he doesn’t have any cards on him.”

“He was probably just being polite since our

company’s hosting the party.”

“Hodaka’s a sucker for good looks. Someone like you, with good looks and a nice personality—he’d fall for you in a second.”

“Are you trying to set us up?”

“Is that what you wanted? I wish I’d known. And here I was trying so hard just to introduce you two.”

During this lighthearted banter, Toya’s emotions finally straightened out. If Makihara hadn’t been kind enough to tell him all this, he would have only gotten more depressed.

“But anyway, what did you think of him? He never goes on TV, so this is the first time you’ve seen him walking and talking, right?”

“He’s much more handsome than I imagined. And I’m not sure how to put it, but it’s like he’s living on some other world.”

“He really is. He’s got money and talent, and all the women he can handle.”

There was no denying that Hodaka made quite an impression. His voice, which seemed to define beauty, the way he had treated Toya like a delicate object—all of it made him exceptional.

Chapter 2

A week had gone by since Toya's run-in with Hodaka. Everyone in the department was stressed. Not a trace of the party remained in all the rush.

He had acted like a complete idiot, in front of Hodaka of all people. But Toya had finally managed to push that off to a corner of his mind. He was back to work as usual.

Toya got depressed whenever he thought about what happened, so he found it better not to. He thought he remembered hearing somewhere that not thinking too hard about things was the trick to living a happy life.

"Sakurai! Can I see you for a second?"

Toya raised his handsome face from the fax he was checking at the front of the office, and his eyes met a meaningful smile on Makihara's face.

"What can I do for you, Mister Makihara?"

"Remind me, how many authors are you managing right now?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but it's around ten."

"You can still take on a few more, then. I'm going to put you in charge of Hodaka's projects."

"Uh—"

Toya wasn't quite sure what had happened at first. He couldn't process something like that out of the blue.

"You said you were a fan of his, and you both went to the same college. You didn't get a bad vibe from him when you two met, did you?"

"I don't know about our college connection, but I didn't feel very confident after we met."

"I told you, Hodaka's reaction meant he thought well of you. Are you still upset about that?"

"Not at all, sir," Toya replied flatly. He didn't want Makihara to think he was being childish by dwelling on it.

"Then what's the big deal? You've got an excellent track record with your authors, and I think you'll get along fine with Hodaka. And even if you don't, everyone else has their hands full. The chief editor is in the hospital, so I'm swamped, too. Anyway, you won't be working with Hodaka until next year, so it shouldn't make too much extra work for you right now."

Toya couldn't think of anything to say. This was too sudden.

"Besides, he always meets his deadlines, so you won't have to worry about that part of it. Hey, why are you so quiet? Don't you want this assignment?"

Of course he wanted it. Really, he was bursting with joy. But it was difficult to react in the face of such happiness. He had dreamed of this day even before joining the company, but he had never imagined that his wish would be granted so quickly.

Toya had always been known as a hard worker with a good-natured personality, but his looks had often interfered and made him the subject of gossip. Toya also tended to lack self-confidence, so even though he

had an excellent performance record, he had often gone unrecognized. So he found it hard to believe he was now being ordered to take over editing for Kai Hodaka. There must have been other people qualified to do the job.

"It's just hard to take in all of a sudden."

"It'll be effective starting next Thursday. You'll go see Hodaka at his home. You should clear your evening schedule."

Then without any further explanation, Makihara muttered, "Back to the salt mines," and vanished into the hallway.

Toya's mouth started to fall open, but he shut it firmly again. This was an amazing stroke of good luck, and he had no idea how to react to it.

He was going to be Kai Hodaka's editor.

He had entertained the idea before, of course; it had been a dream for him. But now that his dream had suddenly become reality, he didn't know what to do.

"You don't know what you're in for, Toya," someone said, interrupting his thoughts. It was Yoshimi, who sat beside him working.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know how many editors Kai Hodaka has gone through?" She didn't seem to have a very good impression of working with Hodaka.

"No. I haven't heard much about it."

"You'll be the fourth. Of course, there have been transfers inside the company, so some of it's inevitable, but no one ever lasts long."

Yoshimi had been working there part-time for four years now, and her outspoken personality meant she

spent her free time chatting with the employees. Thanks to that, she knew more about the department than any other employee. She had already taught Toya a thing or two about how the department worked.

"I hear he's difficult. He's not unfriendly, but it's impossible to tell what he's thinking. If you're such a big fan of his, I think you should just stay away from him. You probably caught Mister Makihara's eye because you had such a good record in your other department."

Yoshimi seemed to be warning him that a fan's mentality would make it hard to deal with Hodaka in a business setting.

"It's all right. If I couldn't deal with that, I couldn't be an editor for anyone."

Maybe it would have been a problem when he was fresh out of college, but Toya had been with Sozan Publishing for four years. He had worked with the arrogant authors of "high" literature as well as the celebrities driven by the bottom line, along with scores of other authors, and his results had improved accordingly. There was no need for Yoshimi to worry so much.

"And I hear he's kind of, like, morally bankrupt. You can't tell what he really means. He's totally untrustworthy." Yoshimi opened her mouth to continue, a meaningful look on her face, but another coworker glanced over at her and she shut it once more. "Sorry, I'm being a downer—congratulations."

"It's okay, it didn't bother me."

Toya smiled, and she sighed with relief. "That's good."

It was nice that she was worried about him,

but the joy of working with Hodaka overwhelmed any doubts. He would be able to get his hands on Hodaka's stories before anyone else. He had the right to work alongside Kai Hodaka.

He would think about everything else later. Right now, he just wanted to enjoy the fact that his dreams had come true.

"You're Kai Hodaka's editor now? That's incredible!" Miwa exclaimed. Toya, sitting across from her, couldn't keep himself from grinning.

Miwa was striking. Her eyes pulled up slightly at the corners and made her look a little like a cat. She was starting to grow her hair out. She worked in a secretarial position at a university, so she dressed plainly to match her conservative workplace. But despite that, she had a knack for preserving a touch of her personal style.

"Yeah. It came out of nowhere, but the assistant editor told me himself."

Miwa loved to talk, and the spaghetti carbonara she had ordered sat in front of her, quickly growing cold. The cheese on Toya's pizza had hardened, and he was losing interest in his food, too.

"That's so cool. I mean, you haven't even been in your new department a month yet, right? Did you boost your performance suddenly?"

"It was just luck. Mister Makihara's really busy, so I think managing Mister Hodaka is too much for him right now." Toya smiled with embarrassment, offering

up an excuse to deflect Miwa's praises.

"Is that why you look so tired? I bet you were too excited to sleep last night."

"I'm not that much of a kid. I was just re-reading Hodaka's novels and wound up staying up all night."

"Yeah, your dream's come true! Even if you say it's just dumb luck, it's still incredible. It means they trust you, you know?"

Miwa's excitement reminded him of Yoshimi's warning, which he thought he'd pushed into a corner of his mind.

They just stuck me with Hodaka.

If what she said was true, then what sort of man was this Kai Hodaka?

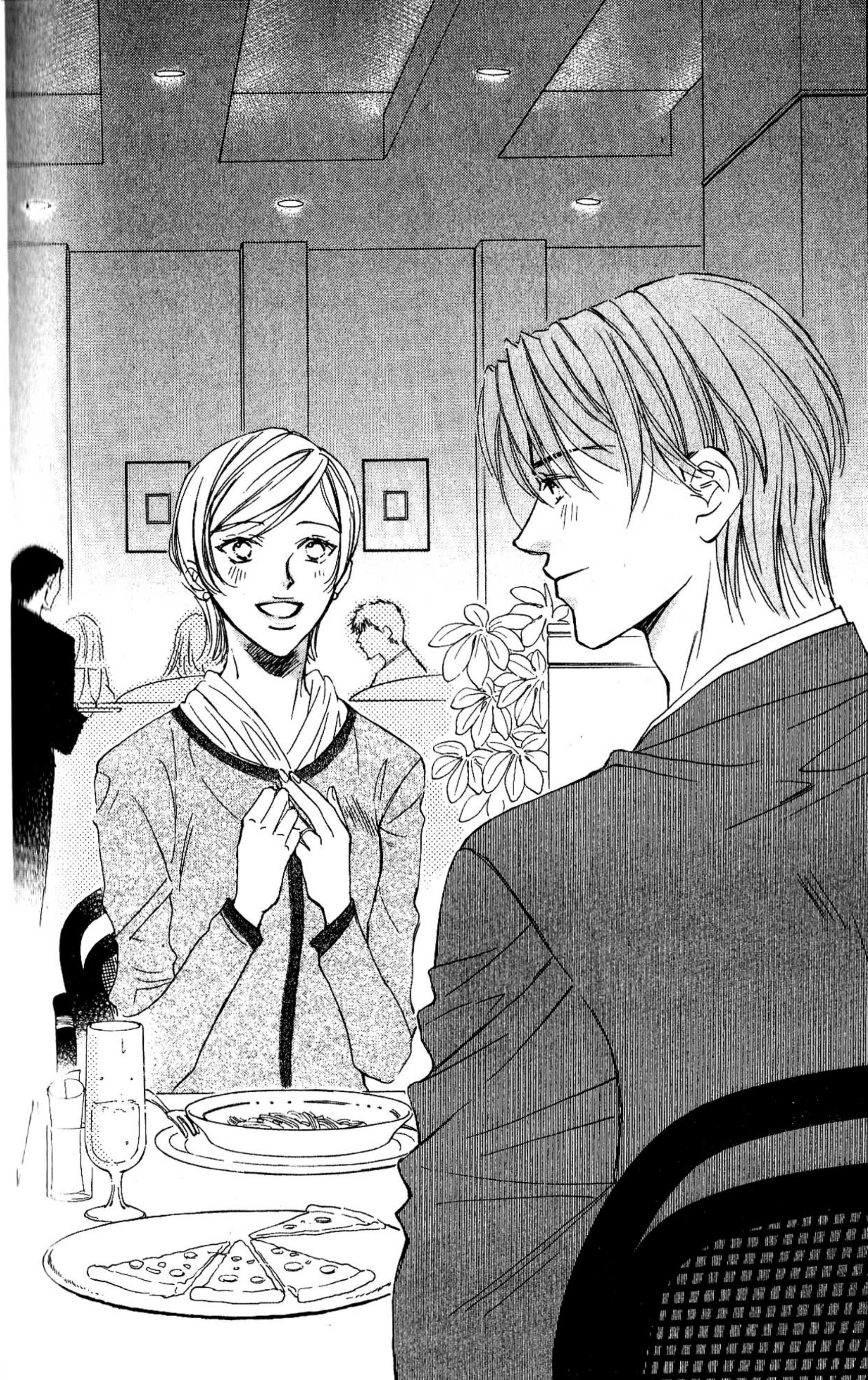
Toya had read his essays, and he seemed like someone with a solid, well thought-out philosophy. He admitted that the number of rumors floating around about Hodaka's escapades with women bothered him, but he wouldn't think that was enough to call the man morally bankrupt.

"It's kind of a relief. You're good at your job, Toya, but you're not the kind of person who'll shove other people out of your way to get to the top."

"Feeling bad about choosing a man who's not going to be a success?"

"Don't be silly. You're competent and you have connections. Besides, the kind of person who's willing to shove their way to the top isn't usually very nice. I love you the way you are."

He admired Miwa for the strength she showed in being able to say that she loved him without any



embarrassment. Toya loved Miwa, too, but he couldn't express it very well. He just couldn't say it.

"Was that what you wanted to tell me? You said there was something urgent."

"Yeah. They made the decision yesterday. I wanted to tell you as soon as I could."

Toya was being honest, but Miwa laughed as if he'd said something funny.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You just get so excited whenever we talk about Kai Hodaka. You're like a little kid. I think it's cute."

It was embarrassing to hear it stated so plainly, and Toya shut his mouth.

"Aw, Toya, are you embarrassed?"

"Cut it out. Why don't we order something? Do you want to get a beer?" Toya noticed that Miwa's glass was empty, and he pointed at the menu.

"I think I'll get some oolong tea. By the way, when are we going to go look at the place for the wedding? If we're going to have it next June, I think we need to just pick a date already. We can change it later, but if we wait till the next bridal fair, I think all the good days will be taken."

"Why don't we go next Sunday?"

Toya and Miwa had attended the same college, where they'd joined the same club. They'd met again at a club reunion and had hit it off, and it hadn't taken long for them to become lovers. They'd been going out for the last three years and had decided to get engaged last month. They'd both enjoyed dating without any expectations for the future, but since Miwa was working

in a traditionally minded environment, marriage had begun to enter her thoughts.

Miwa was the one who was more enthusiastic for the marriage, and she was the one who had asked for it. Toya still felt bad that he hadn't given Miwa a proper proposal. But he thought he could build a nice family with her, as placid as the sea.

Toya had never in his life experienced storms of passion or other violent emotions. The one small exception was when he had first encountered Hodaka's novels. It was a different feeling from romantic love, but he couldn't help but be deeply moved by the man's words.

He had dated a few other women before Miwa, but Toya was indecisive and always wound up being dumped. He liked Miwa, but he wasn't sure this was what marriage should be. Unfortunately, Toya was terrible at deep philosophizing. Seeing Miwa happy made him happy, and he supposed that would be enough.

It was too late to change who he was. If he ever experienced a storm of emotions driving him to madness, he would have no idea what to do.

After settling the bill, Toya left the restaurant. Miwa was waiting for him under a streetlamp.

"Let's go home, Toya."

"Okay."

He reached out for her hand and squeezed it. It was warm and soft. The touch of her dear, familiar hand told him that he would always be the one to protect her, and no one else.

It was Thursday.

Toya was the same as always, but the other editors he passed in the halls kept saying things like "that's too bad" or "I'm sure you'll do fine, just don't be so uptight." At first he thought they were just jealous that he had been chosen to work with a famous author. But they really seemed to feel sorry for Toya.

Only Makihara, who had assigned Toya to the project, was working away cheerfully. Toya wasn't the type to suspect people of having ulterior motives, but even he found this behavior suspicious.

Nevertheless, Toya had waited a long time for this day to come, and nothing could upset him now. The only surprise was that Makihara, Hodaka's previous editor, was too busy to come along to notify Hodaka of the transfer.

Hodaka lived alone near Hamarikyū, in a luxury apartment built by a major developer. He had a maid come to do the housework.

The building was easy to spot, even from a distance: two tall towers, both a chic monochrome. There were trees planted outside the entrance. Toya went through the sliding automatic door and found himself in the foyer. It was like a hotel lobby, and breathtakingly luxurious. The colored stone that covered the floor and walls looked like onyx. It was even equipped with a lounge to entertain visitors, which showed off the amount of room available in a high class way.

There was an intercom near the entrance, so Toya called Hodaka's room to say he was there.

"May I ask who's calling?" a woman's voice

answered, sounding strangely robotic.

"This is Sakurai, from Sozan Publishing."

"We've been expecting you. Would you please come to the fortieth floor of the north tower? When you get off the elevator, Mister Hodaka's door will be the first on your right."

Toya repeated the directions, then cut the call and walked toward the elevators.

Now that he was actually here, he felt suddenly nervous. He was easy to get along with and concerned about others, bringing a soft touch to people's problems. Those were Toya's strong points, but he knew there wasn't much else to recommend him. Maybe that was why Makihara had chosen him. But his strong points could easily turn into weak points. He wasn't arrogant enough to think that Hodaka would like him because of those qualities.

When the elevator stopped, Toya gasped despite himself. There were only a handful of doors in the expansive hallway. He'd heard that the apartments near the top of the building cost several million yen, but now that didn't seem like enough.

Toya found the room number he was looking for and pressed the doorbell. The door opened as if they'd been waiting for him.

"Please come in."

A middle-aged woman stood in the door, probably the same one who had spoken to him over the intercom.

"Mister Hodaka is ready to see you."

He was prepared for extravagance, but the

interior decorating was sparse. There wasn't even a cabinet for shoes next to the door. All he saw were doors, which might have been closets or storerooms.

The woman set out a pair of house slippers for Toya, then opened a door at the back of the room and motioned for him to follow her through.

Toya was struck speechless at the size of the room they entered. There was a sofa and coffee table, as well as small stands and antique shelves. There wasn't much in the way of furniture, but that only accentuated the room's size. The huge windows opened onto a view of Hamarikyu and the sea. The living room alone was several times larger than Toya's entire apartment, but there was still no sign of anyone else.

Makihara had told him that Hodaka's family had generations of wealth. He would be able to live like this for the rest of his life. His education from kindergarten straight through college had been at the schools run by the college Toya had graduated from, which added up to a tidy sum of money. Toya had gotten in by passing the school's exams, and while he'd been there, he'd been reminded many times of the different treatment the so-called escalator kids received. They had been paying a substantial tuition and making contributions to the school ever since kindergarten.

And in any case, all of Hodaka's books sold well. He was earning an incredible amount of money.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Toya heard a voice from an unexpected direction. He looked up at the ceiling reflexively, where a spiral staircase stood off to the right of the room. The

windows were so huge because they formed the stairwell up to the second floor mezzanine. He was shocked at the extravagant use of space that having stairs inside an apartment implied.

"Is something wrong?" Hodaka was coming down the stairs, looking at Toya with a smile on his face.

"Oh, uh, no. Thank you for inviting me to your home."

"And thank you for coming all the way out here. Security's a little tight here—did they give you any problems?"

"Your house is amazing. I heard that it was a penthouse, but this!"

"A friend of mine designed it, so I like to think of it as my personal castle."

"Excuse me for asking, but how many rooms are there?"

"There's the library and master bedroom, the guest room, and a game room, then the dining room, kitchen, and of course this room. So that makes seven. It's nothing extravagant," the man said, gesturing for Toya to take a seat. Toya sat on the sofa obediently. Hodaka stood beside him and put his fingers on Toya's pale hair, bringing it to his lips.

What the—?

Toya stiffened at this completely unexpected act, unable to move.

"Sorry about last time."

There was that beautiful voice, so silky that it even flustered other men like Toya. That voice that could

trigger a sweet giddiness quivering through his body.

“Uh—”

He couldn't think of anything to do or say. The man's breath skimmed erratically over Toya's hair and skin.

Noticing Toya's discomfort, Hodaka pulled his hand back from Toya's hair, his fingers brushing Toya's ear as they withdrew. Toya shuddered. The memory of the touch permeated his thoughts, destroying them slowly. It felt like his brain was going to melt away.

“I was just worried that I'd damaged your hair.”

Oh, okay. He was just checking to make sure it was all right.

Toya had thought he sensed something flirtatious, even sexual, in the touch, but he had been wrong. He was embarrassed at his mistake, and relieved that there was no deeper meaning in Hodaka's action. He shook his head. “It was nothing to worry about, I assure you. I've been worried myself that I might have damaged your suit.”

“I wouldn't have cared if you had.”

The man gave a quick smile, gazing into Toya's eyes, then sat down beside him on the sofa and crossed his legs.

That was when Toya finally remembered the reason for his visit. He was falling into Hodaka's way of doing things. He felt like he had as a novice editor, meeting his first author. But he felt even more jittery now than he had then.

After all, Kai Hodaka was sitting right next to

him. *The Kai Hodaka.*

“I'm sorry, I forgot to explain why I'm here. I need to apologize first for Mister Makihara, since he couldn't be here today.”

“I don't mind. I know how busy he is.” Hodaka shrugged magnanimously. “I heard that you worked on literature and fiction before. If you don't mind my asking, how old are you?”

“I'm twenty-seven. I was in that department for five years.”

“So you're eight years younger than me, then. In that case, there shouldn't be any problems.”

Toya's expression clouded slightly at this, but Hodaka shrugged indifferently.

“It's just a manner of speaking. I'm not very good at being polite, Mister Sakurai. I already want to call you by your first name. Some would find that offensive, but it's probably because I didn't get my first impression of you as part of the job.”

“Oh, gotcha.”

Toya had expected him to say something much worse, and his nerves unwound. He felt so at ease that he had accidentally slipped into using slang, and he cut himself off awkwardly.

“Er, excuse me. I wasn't thinking. But you can call me whatever you like, Mister Hodaka. That would put me more at ease as well.”

“Thanks. That's a big relief.”

A smile broke over Hodaka's face.

Hodaka punctuated his words and behavior with a trace of conceit that was, for the moment, perfectly

tolerable. But then, since he loved his books so much, Toya was not put off even when Hodaka did act entitled. It was only to be expected of someone of such privileged birth.

"I prefer working with someone close to my own age. I think I'll be able to do some interesting work with you."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that."

Toya's sheer happiness brought an artless smile to his face. Hodaka fell silent for a moment, as if examining that response.

"Um—did I say something wrong?"

"Sorry, no. I was just captivated by how happy you looked. But you've recently become engaged? That must be why you look so happy."

Toya was startled by the sudden intrusion into private matters, but he knew to pretend that nothing was amiss. "Thank you for asking. In fact, my fiancée is also a big fan of yours, sir. She was even happier than me to hear about this assignment."

"And I hear you read my books?"

"Of course I do!" Toya answered excitedly, launching into his favorite subject. "I don't know how many times I've read and reread your stories."

He knew this was a gamble, but once he'd started talking about Hodaka's writing, Toya lost control. His nervousness only added to the problem, making him unusually talkative. He went on with unrestrained animation and Hodaka kept his eyes on him the whole time, a smile on his face. Finally, he opened his own mouth to interrupt.

"Could you tell me what you like best about my novels?"

"What do I like best? I don't know. I guess the fact that they're so miserable."

He knew what a horrible thing he'd said the moment the words were out of his mouth. Hodaka seemed to have been caught off guard by Toya's response, too, but he quickly found a way to smile, as if it had been a well-told joke.

"I never noticed. Are my novels worse than others?"

"I didn't mean it like that. It just seems that you don't really like it when everything works out in the end. Sometimes your conclusions are merciless."

Toya was starting to become completely incoherent, but Hodaka still seemed to agree with him.

"I see. So I should write a miserable story for you."

"I'd love to read it anytime."

"I think I'm going to enjoy working with you."

Hodaka could boast of enormous popularity as an author, but his one failing was that he wasn't very prolific.

He knew that if he wrote too much, his readers would turn their backs on him, so he always carefully controlled his work level and never did more than one project a year for any one company. Currently he worked with three companies to publish three books a year at regular intervals. Thanks to this method, he had long graced the bestsellers lists. Sozan had published a hardcover that May, so now there was an implicit

understanding that they would be working to publish something again next May. Once Hodaka had published two or three things in a year, he would refuse to do any more.

A vague hope flitted through Toya's mind. When Hodaka said that he was going to have fun working with Toya, that might have meant he would be willing to bend his policy for him.

"It's too bad that we'll have to wait until next year to work together."

Toya flinched at being beaten to the punch.

Shot down already.

Hodaka hadn't even given him a chance to ask.

"I look forward to working with you, Mister Sakurai." Hodaka stood up and extended a supple hand to Toya. Toya squeezed his hand lightly before realizing that it had been a signal to shake hands. Once Toya began to shake, Hodaka laid his other hand over Toya's. Toya's heart began pounding fiercely, and a tiny noise of surprise escaped him.

"Er—"

This didn't quite qualify as a handshake. Toya felt a subtle eroticism in the warmth between their overlapping fingers. It was as if Toya's nerves had been laid bare, and Hodaka was brushing directly against them.

His skin was as smooth as fine velvet.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's just a habit of mine. Anyway, thank you for coming today."

"Thank you for fitting me into your busy schedule," Toya replied politely and made his exit.

Chapter 3

Still at the office after a staff meeting, Toya booted up his computer and checked his mail. There was one urgent message waiting for him. Peering at the monitor, he saw that the subject was "Essays from the Literary Thicket."

It was from Kai Hodaka.

It had been two weeks since Toya had become his editor, and he'd sent several messages for business in that time. Hodaka's replies to those emails were unwaveringly professional. But Toya was happy just to have a point of contact with the man.

And to be allowed to touch his next piece as soon as it was done? Even if it was just an essay, it was a dream come true. A five page essay would just be a condensation of Hodaka's wisdom. He yearned to read every word of it.

It was nearly time for a departmental meeting, so Toya wrote up a quick reply to say he had gotten the file.

The meetings began at five o'clock every Friday. The eight members of the department straggled into the meeting room in ones and twos. Then, after a brief welcome by Makiyara, who was covering for the chief editor during his convalescence, the bomb dropped.

"Sales has issued a warning to our department about our performance."

The room started buzzing the moment the words were out of Makihara's mouth. A cloud fell over everyone's faces at the news that the department's sales figures were only half those expected. If the trend continued, the department would be in jeopardy.

There had been a downturn in performance company-wide. The weekly magazines had just been put on hiatus and everyone was worried about what department would be downsized next. These last few years, the sales of pulp novels had not been impressive and they'd been relying a great deal on a handful of very popular authors.

Even if the circulation numbers had fallen off by a few points, the departments said they were covering for it by increasing the number of publications every month, but that wouldn't work for the novels. They had never produced more books than the number expected to sell.

A coworker named Yoshikawa spoke up. "Kai Hodaka's books always boost sales, so why don't we see if he'd be willing to write an extra book for us, or maybe start up a new series?"

Toya felt all eyes turning to him.

"I'm not sure he would do it. We only get one volume a year from him. If we force him to do extra, he probably won't write anything for us next year."

Everyone in attendance acknowledged this. It was common knowledge, and not just inside the industry, that Hodaka could be very stubborn about his work.

"Obviously we can't rest all our hopes on Hodaka. Yoshikawa, what are your authors doing? Have Fujita and Nonomiya gotten their plots ready?"

"They're both coming along. They've sent in their outlines. We could probably get something from them within the year."

"Good."

So Yoshikawa was going to get manuscripts from his authors, who were only modestly successful. Despite the fact that he was just starting out, Toya couldn't help but feel eager.

"Our fiscal year ends in March. I'd like to get something from Hodaka this year, too, if possible."

If they managed that, they would be able to salvage some profit this year. They would be operating on a shoestring, but they had no choice but to get by on that. They all knew that thanks to the recession and the fact that fewer people were reading for pleasure, the entire company's sales were slumping, not just their department's. On top of that, they hadn't had many big name projects this year. If their department couldn't get its numbers out of the red, it would be in danger of downsizing.

But it would be a formidable task to get another manuscript out of Hodaka this year.

"I'm not sure I can get Mister Hodaka to agree to this. I've only met him once. And everyone knows about his policy of only writing one book a year. I think it's too early in our relationship to pull it off."

"An editor's job is to get the book out of the author. You're going to convince him to do it and be

published by March. Got it?" Makihara's response was blunt and final.

Of course, Makihara's reaction made sense. Toya felt the same way: he wanted to read Hodaka's next work as soon as possible. As one of his readers, he was looking forward to reading Hodaka's next book, and as his editor, he wanted to push forward his first job with him if at all possible.

But Hodaka was rumored to be cunning and deaf to the pleas of any publishing house. He had a tendency toward arrogance, but his great talent and productivity made it impossible to say that he was simply overconfident.

How could Toya possibly wrestle a manuscript out of someone like that? He had an ominous feeling that Makihara had given up the job as Hodaka's editor because he had known that this would happen.

In which case, he had given the project up as impossible from the very beginning, and that annoyed Toya.

"All right. I'll see what I can do."

"Excellent. Good luck. Now, about the company's fiftieth anniversary award ceremony—"

Toya just didn't want Hodaka to resent him. It was bad to let emotions get involved in editorial relationships with authors, but Hodaka was an exception. Toya didn't think he'd be able to get a manuscript from him, but he would do whatever he could to make it happen. He wasn't going to give up.

"I told you from the start that I can't write for your company right now. I made that clear to Mister Makihara, too. If you don't believe me, ask him for yourself."

The futility of this conversation must have been frustrating, but Hodaka was a patient man.

That only made Toya feel more guilty. Hodaka had sent him away twice now, saying he was too busy, but today Toya took the elevator up to his apartment, hoping that the third time would be the charm.

"I'm sorry to keep bothering you like this."

He knew Hodaka considered his request impossible, but Toya was in no position to ignore his boss's orders. And anyway, he wanted to read Hodaka's next work more than anything in the world. He longed to work with this author he so admired.

"Sorry, but my policy is to not undercut my own sales."

"I understand your feelings, but the company believes that a continuation of your previous work would capitalize on the positive reviews it received while it's still fresh in the reader's minds."

"There must be some reason you keep asking, since you know I won't do it," Hodaka said dryly, though he didn't seem upset.

Maybe I should be direct, too, Toya thought, steeling himself.

"Our company's suffered a big slump in sales recently, but we would manage to turn a profit if we could offer a new release from you. That's why we're asking for your help if at all possible."

"So that's it. But you know, I don't really appreciate being given the responsibility of rescuing your company from its own failures."

Hodaka had been listening attentively, his face neutral except for a slightly ironic smile. He didn't seem that upset, but there was something languid and elusive behind his calm. No doubt Hodaka was capable of cutting people down without ever losing his considerate smile. He gave off that impression.

"I understand that. Actually, I saw your latest work. Six Winds published it last week. I really enjoyed it. I felt like it was breaking new ground."

Hodaka watched Toya for a long time as he passionately recounted his impressions of the book, as if he were some sort of spectacle. Conscious of his gaze, Toya finally got himself under control and stopped talking.

"Thank you for your input. I'm glad to hear that you got so much out of it."

"When did you write that piece, Mister Hodaka?"

"I think I finished the actual writing in mid-June. But the proofreading took a while, so it wound up being just in time for the publication deadline."

"I see. So what are you working on right now?"

"I haven't decided yet. I wanted to take it easy for a while."

"Are you running into a block?"

Hodaka only shrugged at Toya's loaded question.

"It's not that. There's just nothing I want to write

about right now."

If there was nothing he wanted to write about, that was basically the same as saying that he was blocked. At times like this, Toya usually worked together with the authors he'd been charged with, but he wasn't sure if he could use such a direct approach with Hodaka. He hesitated.

"Then perhaps a change of pace is exactly what you need."

"What do you mean?"

"You need a fresh stimulus to give you the seed for a story. There's a limit to what you can create when you're chained to your computer."

"Of course. But I thought you wanted me to write something for you. What you're saying makes no sense."

"Obviously, I'd prefer your change of pace not interfere with your ability to work."

"Hmph. I'd love to hear what you suggest, then." A slight smile played at the corners of Hodaka's mouth and he cast his eyes over Toya's handsome face.

"Well, uh—if it was me, I would go to a hot spring resort or something. Maybe go see a movie."

"A hot spring or a movie, huh?" Hodaka laughed heartily at these cliché suggestions.

Ah—

Toya was startled at Hodaka's expression, which was even more relaxed and friendly than he'd expected. He had no idea Hodaka could laugh so gently. His face was beautiful without a trace of pretension on it. You simply had to fall in love with a face like that.

Hodaka took in Toya's gaze and leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "Don't look at me so intensely. I might take it the wrong way."

"What do you mean?" Toya's voice was husky, disturbed as he was by the whisper so close against his ear. If he'd thought just for a moment about what Hodaka had said, he would have understood exactly what he meant, but it was hard to take in so suddenly.

"Have you never been aware of the way you look at people or the way people look at you?"

"I can't really see the way I look at people."

"That's not what I mean." Hodaka chuckled, as if Toya's answer had amused him.

Hodaka was definitely warming up to Toya. No matter how obstinate the person, there was always an opportunity to open them to others. If Hodaka was letting Toya in, this was his chance.

"This may be presumptuous of me, but I'm really concerned for you, sir. I'd like to take you around town, if you'd let me."

"Thank you. It's kind of you to offer."

"I'm not just being polite. I love—I mean, being a fan of yours, I'm always eager to read more. I want to do anything I can to help you."

He wanted Hodaka to write something good. Even if it only reached one new person, he wanted more people to discover Hodaka's writing.

Toya himself had trouble believing how fanatically persistent he was being.

"I've got to say, you're a fascinating guy." Hodaka narrowed his eyes, searching Toya's face. The

gentle smile had disappeared. He was now staring at Toya with a rigid expression. The disappearance of Hodaka's beautiful smile filled Toya with a powerful remorse.

"They told me you were good at your job, and you're more collected than other men your age, but there's something more to you. Ever since I met you, you've done nothing but betray my expectations."

"I'm sorry. I just thought I might be able to help and got a little carried away."

Complicated emotions sculpted Toya's expression once more as he apologized, but Hodaka shook his head in amusement. "No, it's interesting. Very interesting."

Of course even Toya wasn't foolish enough to take Hodaka's words at face value. It would be just like Hodaka to have some sort of trap under the surface.

At the end, his voice dried up in a sigh that touched Toya as terribly charming.

"Well, thank you for your kind offer, but I like to keep business and personal matters separate and not indebt myself to others unnecessarily."

Toya was startled at this stream of words. The man driving this bargain was rich with talent and charm. He must have had any number of people to spend his time with.

"Naturally you'd rather spend your time on a date with a beautiful woman."

"As long as the person's interesting, it doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman. I always enjoy spending time with you."

Hodaka's answer soothed Toya's feelings.

"So why don't I show you around on my personal time? There wouldn't be any problem then."

Toya could understand why Hodaka wanted to draw a sharp line between business and his private life. If the two got mixed up, it would be hard to do what needed to be done. Toya would recognize later how presumptuous he had been, but at the moment he couldn't think of anything else to say.

He loved Hodaka's books. Hodaka was going to create something, and Toya wanted to help him do it.

Because Toya was more committed to his work than most, he was usually careful not to get too invested in what his authors were writing. He'd been described as harsh for his manuscript reviews, despite being so friendly with people. But with Hodaka, he would easily forget to keep his editorial distance and get absorbed.

For Toya, Hodaka's works were unique in every way.

"How could I refuse an offer like that?" Hodaka smiled seductively.

Toya was so nervous his heart was racing. Thanks to his distraction, he had made a wrong turn on the way to Hodaka's apartment and gotten completely lost. He was glad he'd left the house with plenty of time to spare before their appointment.

"This isn't like you."

He'd met with Hodaka three times now. But for

the first time, the anxiety of seeing him was killing him.

He didn't mind making the rash promise to take Hodaka out to help inspire him. But he realized now that if he did something wrong today and gave Hodaka a bad impression of him, all the effort he'd put in would go down the drain. And even if this inspired Hodaka to write something, there was no guarantee he would do the work with Toya.

Toya had been agonizing over what to do these last three days. He had suggested a drive, a movie, or even a sauna, but he wasn't sure that such run-of-the-mill diversions would please a man like Hodaka.

He parked his car in the underground garage and waited for Hodaka in the foyer, just as he had been instructed.

He was dressed casually—it would have been inappropriate to wear a suit—but despite the informality, he couldn't relax. He pushed aside his riotous emotions and sat purposefully down on a sofa. Just then, Hodaka arrived.

"Good morning. Be gentle with me today."

A thick grey sweater and black corduroy pants dressed Hodaka's limber body, drawing attention to his handsome face.

"You said we were going for a drive? Where were you planning to go?"

"That will become clear once we arrive," Toya said with a smile, shouldering his anxiety into the background.

"In that case, I want you to promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Could you stop talking to me so politely? Today we're just a couple of guys, no business."

"You're right. I'll try."

Toya thought that Hodaka was the one speaking rather formally, but that was just a difference of opinion: no helping that. His request was easily granted and Toya nodded his head. He was off to a good start.

"Let's get going, then," he said, and they headed off to the garage.

Hodaka looked at Toya's car strangely, then climbed into the passenger's seat. This model had a lot of leg room, but even so, Hodaka's limbs were so long that it was a tight fit.

"I'm sorry, this is a little small for you. I should have rented a car."

"It's fine. You don't need to worry about it. This is just one more interesting experience."

Toya's irises were paler than most people's, so he had trouble with strong sunlight. He often had to wear sunglasses, especially when he was driving. Even on a clear autumn day like this one, he still needed dark glasses. And anyway, he was completely flustered to have Hodaka sitting right beside him, so he hoped the glasses would help him act cooler.

"I'm sure you wish you could be sitting next to one of your lady friends instead."

"Don't bother yourself about that. Or are you jealous of the women I see?"

Maybe he was thinking about Hodaka's relationships with women more than was strictly

necessary. Toya apologized, then fell silent.

"No, I'm honored that you're thinking about me."

Toya couldn't take that at face value, either, and the conversation quickly ground to a halt. Toya's anxiety parched his throat. He should have bought some drinks, but he had been so nervous all morning that he hadn't been able to think that far ahead.

"Could you stop here?"

Toya pulled over to the curb at this sudden request. Hodaka told him to wait, then slid out of the car and strode down the sidewalk.

When he returned, he offered Toya a can of coffee. He must have bought them from a vending machine near the road. Toya hesitated, not quite understanding, and Hodaka kindly opened the can for him.

"When it's this hot, a man gets thirsty."

He saw that Hodaka had one for himself, and knew it wouldn't be mature to refuse the offer.

"When you put it that way..." Toya was overjoyed at the kindness Hodaka was showing him. "I never would have thought you drank out of vending machines, too, sir."

"When I'm thirsty, I'm not very picky about things like that. And stop calling me 'sir.' We're off-duty today."

"All right."

Toya noticed that Hodaka, too, had grown more casual. It was refreshing. Even Toya's sugarless coffee tasted sweet, as if Hodaka's words had magically sweetened it.

The drive was tense and there was little conversation, but that allowed Toya to concentrate on driving safely. Finally they arrived at their destination, and earlier than expected.

"Here we are."

It was early October, so they were still a little early for the autumn foliage, but color was beginning to tinge the famous stands of ginkgo.

"If you'll step out of the car, we can take a look around."

"This place is so familiar. I haven't been here in more than ten years," Hodaka murmured, almost in a sigh, as he climbed out of the car.

"You wrote in one of your essays that you hadn't been here since your college graduation. But you said you always wanted to come back if you ever had the chance. So I thought you'd like it if I brought you here."

"You've got quite a memory."

"I'm just a fan of yours. I haven't been here myself in five years."

Literature students of K— College would typically study at the Yokohama campus for two years, then go to the downtown Tokyo campus after that. The only time they came back to this place was for their graduation.

"I thought you were just going to take me to a spa. I'm surprised, but in a good way."

Hodaka turned back to look at Toya, a smile on his face. It wasn't the gentle smile that Toya had been expecting, but his praise was reward enough.

"Since you're so set on a spa, I'll take you to one next time."

It looked like he'd cleared the first hurdle. He felt relief uncoiling inside him.

"By the way, sir—I mean, Mister Hodaka. What did you do for lunch when you were a student here?"

There were only forty-five minutes between the end of classes and the start of the third period. When Toya and his friends had been here, the area around the train station had already been developed and there were a lot of fast food restaurants. But in Hodaka's day, it would have been nothing but a waste of time to go back to town to eat. If they ever had to wait in line somewhere, they would have almost always been late for third period.

"We ate the only food we had. There was a cafeteria then."

"Oh, at the cafeteria? I stayed at the student-run cafeteria on the second floor. At the time, I wanted my own car, so I was saving all my money. All I could afford was an eighty yen fish sandwich."

"That image doesn't suit you."

"It wasn't about that, I just needed a car. I was poor. I spent all my free time at a part-time job, too."

Second period was just about to begin, and the campus was full of people.

Even there, Hodaka attracted people's attention. No crowds gathered, but they wanted to go somewhere as isolated as possible. Heading to the right, they slipped past the campus center and the cafeteria.

Places reminiscent of their time as students were

everywhere: from the stadium, the big lecture halls, the language labs, and the registrar's office to the campus center, the cafeteria, and the school store.

"Hey. Look at that big ginkgo over there!" Toya cried without thinking, childlike, then clamped his mouth shut.

But Hodaka didn't look down on him for it, instead asking, "What about it?"

There was no one near the large ginkgo tree they were looking at. "You've never heard? There's a legend about this tree that says that if a couple kisses beneath its branches, their relationship will last a long time."

"Really?" So low class rumors like that were beneath Hodaka after all.

"Yes. We would bring couples out here after club meetings and make them kiss. It was terrible. We wouldn't be satisfied until they did it."

"Do you want to try?" Hodaka gave a slight smile and pushed Toya back against the ginkgo.

"Huh?"

"A kiss." The man's lithe fingers lifted Toya's chin. "Wouldn't it be nice if we stayed together a long time?" The enchanting voice trickled into his ears, and Toya could only stare at Hodaka, not even trying to move.

Hodaka's beautiful face came closer, and Toya was spellbound, frozen in place. He had enough self-control to not reveal his panic on his face, but his heart was rushing out of control. Toya was speechless before the man's face, so much more serious than he'd expected. His eyes were clouded by a depth that seemed to suck Toya in.



And once Toya had caught his eyes, he couldn't look away.

Hodaka came to a stop only a few inches from him, and his mouth curved in a subtle smile. "Just kidding. I've been lucky enough just to have you all to myself today."

Hodaka slipped away from Toya, frozen and mute, and began strolling down the path.

Toya had to hurry to catch up, but he had no idea what to say to him once he did. Now, in stark contrast to only a moment before, Hodaka's face looked unspeakably sad. It felt somehow impossible to penetrate the desolation around him, and Toya lost his chance to say anything. There was a subtle barrier around Hodaka, like a thin film.

Toya got the feeling that Hodaka was letting him see it.

There was no sign that Hodaka meant to push others away with this barrier; on the contrary, it attracted attention. He was the sort of person that people could never ignore.

Toya wasn't sure why he interpreted it that way.

Suddenly aware that he was being watched, Hodaka turned around and smiled. "Do you want to get something to eat? You must be tired from all that driving."

After so much silence, Toya let out a thoughtless "All right!"

Would he ever see that relaxed, friendly smile from Hodaka again? If he got a little closer, a little more

personal, would Hodaka let him see his gentle eyes?

Why was he dwelling so much on this man's expressions, anyway?

Chapter 4

“So you like old movies, too, Mister Hodaka?”

Toya was pleasantly drunk, the feeling suffusing his entire body. At first he had refused Hodaka's offer to send him home in a taxi, but it turned out that they would be passing by his apartment anyway, and Toya finally agreed.

They hadn't had any particular plans to get together, but he had gotten a message from Hodaka on his cell phone that evening. There was a movie premiere he couldn't get out of going to, but he didn't want to go alone, so he invited Toya. Toya leapt at the invitation. He had just finalized the proofs for next month's releases, so he didn't even have any work to think about, and building a good relationship with Hodaka was essential for the work to come. There were plenty of reasons to accept.

Besides, it made him happy to think that Hodaka needed him. The drive they'd taken to the K— College campus the other day had been a big help in strengthening their relationship. Hodaka must have friends or a lover, but Toya was pleased to think that Hodaka needed him for a change of pace. That impulse had brought the two of them together five or six times in the last month.

“Yeah, I like the classics like Hitchcock.”

"Me too! I like *Rebecca* and *Suspicion*, but Miwa—I mean, my girlfriend hates old movies. That's something we can never agree about."

As he met Hodaka more and more often outside of work, Toya was able to talk without getting worked up. He controlled himself when they were talking business, but it was different at times like this, when they talked about their hobbies.

That wasn't to say that their interests matched perfectly. But Hodaka was someone he didn't need to choose his topics with. They were relatively close in age and that probably helped. Toya had to work with important authors who were forty years older than him, and this was much easier compared to that.

"My family had a theater in the house. I used to watch old movies there with my grandfather."

"I read about that in a magazine. But I forget: where did your family live?"

"We used to live in Takanawa but now they're in Hayama." Noticing the perplexed look on Toya's face, Hodaka went on to explain, "When my grandfather retired, we moved the house and rebuilt it near the Imperial villa in Hayama. I liked it there, so I still go back often."

"That's amazing. That must have been great as a kid."

He wanted to keep talking with Hodaka, but unfortunately the end had come. The taxi reached a road Toya recognized, and he cut off their conversation to speak to the driver. "Here is fine."

Toya got out his wallet to pay his half of the

fare, but Hodaka stopped him. "I was the one who invited you."

"Then let's agree to split costs on private time. But that reminds me: I'd like to meet with you to discuss business sometime."

Without answering, Hodaka paid the taxi fare with a slight smile.

Is it a good sign that he didn't refuse?

Hodaka didn't clarify the point for him. He was toying with him.

Toya waited until the taxi was out of sight before going back to his room. He looked at the phone as he pulled his necktie off. Strangely, an orange button was lit up.

"It's me. Where are you? Work?"

It was Miwa.

Oh no. Today was the thing with the ceremony hall. I was supposed to call her.

There was a text message and a voice mail on his cell phone, too, all from Miwa.

But it was after midnight and he felt guilty about calling so late.

When he was at the movie with Hodaka, he had remembered to send her a text message, but he had only written to say "Sorry, I can't talk right now. I'm in a meeting."

He realized that this was the first time he'd ever lied to her. But he felt less guilty than he thought he would, and he found that unusual. Obviously it was because he was enjoying spending time with Hodaka so much.

Hodaka had charmed Toya completely. Maybe the man had the power to attract people the same way his books did, and Toya had been captivated by that power.

Hodaka was serene and composed, and Toya's conversations with him were always rich. Toya couldn't begin to understand why the people in his office said that Hodaka was "morally bankrupt." Though in the end Toya was still very conscious of this criticism of Hodaka, always thinking about how impossible it was to believe.

It was true that the man was capable of writing penetrating descriptions of his characters. But considering he was so placid, there was no way to know what was really going on in his mind. Toya entertained every possible scenario, but he still came down on the side of Hodaka, who had created those books.

Even without that factor, Toya was often struck by the man's mysterious features. Hodaka wrapped himself in an aura of rationality, but his voice contained such sensuality that he must have been unstable, and each of his mannerisms had a touch of depravity in them. Maybe it was the combination of his voice, which inspired such intensely sensual feelings, with his evocative gestures that made it so hard to see the real Hodaka. Maybe that was what made him seem so mysterious.

But even this air of mystery seemed charming to Toya. It was more stressful, but he could never have enjoyed the same intimate conversations he had with Hodaka, a man who was endlessly fascinating, with someone shallow who immediately revealed their true intentions.

Besides, Toya had the feeling that Hodaka was opening up to him. He never would have imagined that he could interact this easily with the author he so admired. If everything continued like this, he would be able to work with Hodaka sooner than he thought. Toya's abilities would decide Hodaka's next project. He wanted more than anything for it to be Hodaka's masterpiece. He wanted to be closer to Hodaka, even if only a little bit.

I'll give him one last push, Toya decided.

The words "straight home" were written under Toya's name in magic marker on the whiteboard. That meant he was leaving the office tomorrow at noon. This way, he would be covered even if an urgent phone call came in.

He had a copy of the hardcover novel Hodaka had published last month in his briefcase. He had read it three or four times.

At times, Hodaka revealed a view of other people that was ruthless, brutal enough to unnerve Toya. His perceptive style laid bare the hearts of his protagonists, demolished them, and exposed them. But there remained a strange charm that couldn't help but draw people in.

Toya wanted Hodaka to create a book with him that showcased this charm to its fullest.

If he could figure Hodaka out and build a strong relationship with him, Toya knew that sooner or later

Hodaka would agree to write for him. But he wasn't sure it would really be possible, and so he decided to try asking one more time. But as the days went by, his conviction wavered.

This was the fourth time he'd come to Hodaka's apartment, and only the third that he was allowed past the door. The housekeeper greeted him politely and he moved into the living room. Hodaka was there, staring out the window looking bored.

"Hello. It's good to see you again, Mister Hodaka." Toya smiled and handed Hodaka a PR magazine that had published his essay. "Here's your complimentary copy."

"Thanks. I feel bad that you've had to spend all this time with me to jumpstart my creativity. You must be worn out at the office. You're the one who needs a break."

"Perhaps so. Not a day goes by that you aren't on my mind, sir. It reassures me to see you in person like this."

"That's a pretty passionate confession," Hodaka said as he laughed and looked up at Toya. "Did you come to try and persuade me again today? You're putting yourself through a lot of trouble."

There was no point trying to hide it. What other reason would he have for coming all the way here to drop off something he could have easily mailed?

"Will you let me convince you?"

"I admit I'm curious how far you'd go to convince me, but for the moment I'd like a little respite from it. We'll leave the fun of you persuading me for next time."

"So, in essence, you're saying that you haven't started planning your next piece?"

"Yeah."

In that case, Toya would never get a better chance than this. Somehow, he had to win Hodaka over. "Then please consider writing for my company."

Hodaka coolly regarded Toya's relentless efforts. "You never give up." His voice was sharp, in stark contrast to just a few moments ago.

He's going to refuse.

Toya felt a sharp pain in his chest, as if Hodaka's words had thrust a knife into his heart. He felt betrayed, as if all the time they'd spent together had been a lie, nothing but a fraud. Was the real Hodaka this cold?

He shouldn't have been so shocked. Hodaka wasn't his friend: he was someone he worked with.

Toya needed Hodaka's manuscript now more than ever.

"I would very much like to get a manuscript from you as soon as possible. I'll do whatever it takes to help you!"

His powerful feelings gushed out of him in those passionate words. He wanted to laugh at himself for his foolishness. He was so obsessed with Hodaka's writing.

"Take it easy. So much passion is wasted on a man."

Toya's cheeks burned at what Hodaka was implying.

"You're going beyond the call of duty being that zealous. Why don't you take some time to relax?"

"What?" Toya's voice lost its fervor for a

moment, and Hodaka smiled, as if that amused him.

"You promised to give me a change of pace, didn't you? But you need a break as much as I do."

"That may be, but—"

"I have a table in my game room. Are you up for a game of pool?"

"If I play pool with you, will you write something for us?" Toya asked excitedly.

Hodaka's response was noncommittal. "That depends on you."

His voice was dispassionate, as if he were testing Toya, and even Toya, usually so unflappable, got annoyed. It was hard to keep his cool when he was with Hodaka. Hodaka seemed to enjoy disrupting Toya's emotions, and he knew exactly how to do it.

"I'm not going to just play a game of pool with nothing in it for me. I'm here on business."

"That's a pretty cold-hearted thing to say. I let you win me over, didn't I?"

"So then if I play pool with you, you'll give us a manuscript?"

"That's not what I said," Hodaka said mischievously, as if he were enjoying even this childish argument.

He probably wasn't going to write a manuscript in exchange for just one game of pool. Toya had to make it interesting to get Hodaka to go along with it.

Just then, a thought flashed into Toya's mind. But it would be dangerous. It might make Hodaka angry if he proposed it.

But even the most trivial thing would do to get a

toe in the door. He needed to get started on wringing this manuscript out of Hodaka. There was no harm in trying, and asking might actually do some good.

After some deliberation, Toya was ready.

"Would you like to place a wager?"

"A bet? On our pool game?"

"Yes. I'd like you to put a manuscript up for collateral."

"A manuscript?"

"Yes. If I win, I want you to write something for my company."

Why was he so obsessed with something like this? He didn't know, but he couldn't stop himself. It wasn't just part of his job; he was doing this as a fan who couldn't wait to read what Hodaka would write next.

Hodaka ground out his cigarette, not even half smoked yet. He stared at Toya piercingly, as if trying to make him take a step back. He might have thought Toya was disrespecting his writing by making it part of a bet. But Toya had no choice. If he didn't stake everything on this single ray of hope, Hodaka would never write the manuscript for him.

"So what do I get if I win?"

Hodaka was interested. Toya was relieved, but he had nothing to offer in return.

"If you don't have anything of equal value to offer as collateral, it's not much of a bet, is it?"

"But I can't write a novel. I don't have anything to offer," Toya confessed, and a faint smile twisted Hodaka's lips.

"You really are an intriguing man." He stretched

his fingers out and took hold of the fine line of Toya's chin. Toya was surprised by the touch, but he wouldn't allow any more discomfort to show on his face.

"I want you more and more," the man whispered, close enough that his breath brushed Toya's ears. His voice was fascinating and deceptive, sweet enough to intoxicate.

Toya felt like he was slipping into the lure of the voice, like he would forget all about the bet. He had surrendered himself to the power of this voice so many times already. Toya was completely enthralled by the intoxicating effect of Hodaka's fingers, his touch, and his voice.

"For your side of the bet, I'll take you."

"Me?"

"If I win, you will be mine for the rest of the night tonight. Do you accept?"

Even for Kai Hodaka, this was a bizarre request. Toya had no idea what he meant by it. His mind had been paralyzed by the power of Hodaka's voice.

Toya couldn't imagine that he, a man, was physically attractive to Hodaka, and so he imagined that he must have wanted his labor as a reward. Maybe he wanted him to do some bit of annoying research for him or to organize his library. Even if he lost, Toya wouldn't mind paying off a debt like that.

Toya bowed his head politely, relieved that Hodaka had taken the bet. "Of course. I look forward to the game."

The game was laughably one-sided. On reflection, Toya wasn't that surprised—it made sense, after all. Toya hadn't originally thought it was an unreasonable gamble, but of course there was a vast difference in ability between himself, who'd played pool a couple of times in college, and Hodaka, who owned his own table.

They settled on nine-ball, the most basic style of pool, for their competition. The rules of the game were incredibly simple: all he had to do was hit the target balls, marked one through nine, into the pockets (in order) with the cue ball. The one who dropped the nine-ball would be the winner. Obviously, he could only hit the cue ball and he needed to hit it skillfully in order to hit the other balls.

The game was over in a matter of minutes, and Hodaka hadn't made any particular effort. It was pathetic. Hodaka took pity on Toya and offered him two rematches, but he managed to lose them all spectacularly.

Hodaka had been the very epitome of style as he played, cigarette dangling from his lips. Toya knew he was being played easily, and he felt shamed and frustrated.

"Well, I guess I'll claim my reward now."

Hodaka gave a small laugh and Toya lowered his eyes. Hodaka's jet black eyes seemed to be piercing into him, as if he were peering into the very depths of his soul.

"So you get me, right? Is there something you want me to do?"

"Of course. I never would have made the bet otherwise."

Hodaka climbed the staircase, cigarette still hanging from his lips.

"This is the guest room. Go take a shower, then change into this bathrobe. When you're done, come to my bedroom."

"What is this?" Toya's thoughts were disjointed. It was like his circuits were broken. A smile played over Hodaka's lips as Toya knit his eyebrows together dubiously.

"I told you I'd take you as my reward."

Toya's mind went blank. He had finally grasped the true meaning of his promise. Toya's throat was dry and his voice shook. "Is this a joke?" What was he talking about? What was he thinking?

Hodaka fired back without giving Toya a moment to think. "Did you ask for my manuscript as a joke?"

Toya had spoken out of turn, and now he was paying for it. He couldn't take back what he'd said. Toya had lost all means of escape. He took a deep, quiet breath before returning to his struggle to grasp the situation he was in.

"Go take your shower, then come see me."

Hodaka's typical detachment filled his eyes with a cool light, without a single spark of lust. That put Toya's mind at ease. This was just Hodaka's way of having fun. Maybe he was hazing Toya.

Anyway, he was certain that Hodaka was just making a tasteless joke by saying he wanted Toya's

body. An intelligent, high class man like Hodaka would never indulge in sexual harassment like this. If Toya took Hodaka's joke seriously and ran away, Hodaka would lose respect for him.

"Oh, and take off all your clothes. You won't need your underwear. Is there anything else you need?"

"...NO."

Hodaka was taking this joke pretty far, but that could just be part of his detail-oriented personality.

"My room is the last on the second floor. When you're done, go there," Hodaka said, then turned around nonchalantly and disappeared from Toya's sight.

The bathroom might have been intended only for guests, but it was breathtakingly large. Toya got into the shower, his mind somewhere else. If he didn't shower, Hodaka would remark on it, and anyway, he felt strangely shy. He wanted to delay seeing Hodaka again as long as possible.

And while it was likely that Hodaka was only having some fun with him, what if he was serious?

Toya stayed in the shower until his skin wrinkled without ever feeling ready. He put on his bathrobe and left the bathroom.

He knocked on the door at the back of the second floor, just as he'd been told.

"Come in."

It looked like Hodaka had been knocking back whiskey. He set his glass on a table and looked at Toya.

"Take it off."

The order confused Toya. Without the fabric covering him, his naked body would be exposed to the

man's gaze. He must have done something to make him very angry. Maybe he really had disrespected Hodaka's writing. Making his valuable writing the subject of a bet was sure to upset any author.

If Hodaka was serious, would he really have to offer his body to him?

"Did you hear me? I said take it off." Hodaka spoke maliciously. "You lost the bet, and you promised to pay up."

Toya gathered his courage, bullied by Hodaka's prodding. He hoped that if he could prove himself, it would end here.

He untied the thin belt of the bathrobe and shyly exposed his chest. His smooth skin was exposed to the light, violated by the man's eyes. But Toya couldn't bring himself to take the bathrobe all the way off.

"I won the bet, so you're going to do things my way."

Hodaka's lips brushed Toya's neck, and Toya jumped at the trembling sensation.

"Wait, sir—please." This had gone far enough. He wanted Hodaka to say that this had all been an act. To scare him, or shock him.

"No." Hodaka's answer was harsh and concise.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know how to respond to jokes like this."

"Did you think you'd get by with a quick punch line? You're pretty naïve."

Hodaka knocked Toya backwards, and he fell onto the bed with a thud. Toya was trying to gather the two sides of his bathrobe when Hodaka caught him off-



guard and pressed down on top of him.

He swept his limbs out instinctively to escape, but Hodaka contained him easily. Toya was hesitant and confused. He had no power to resist and no hope of escape.

"That's enough! We both agreed on this contract. Isn't that right?"

"If you're serious about this, then there's been a misunderstanding. This is wrong!"

"You surprise me. You mean to tell me that you've never slept with a man, despite the way you're always looking at me?"

"Of course I haven't!"

Hodaka trailed his tongue from the tip of Toya's chin down his neck, and Toya gasped in surprise.

Toya had his share of experience with women, but it wasn't huge, by any means. He would have said he was ambivalent toward sex. That was why he was at such a complete loss for what to do now.

"Stop it!"

Hodaka had both his arms pinned, splaying him on the bed. The sight of the man's handsome face so close to his assaulted Toya with a shame so strong he could have screamed.

"If this is your first time, that's even better. I'll teach you how to appreciate a man."

"No!"

Hodaka pinched Toya's nipples without inhibition. It was the first time anyone had ever touched that part of his body, and a shiver ran instantly through him. Apparently satisfied by his response, the man

rolled his tongue over Toya's nipples. Toya shrank from the unfamiliar sensation of wet warmth touching his nipples.

"Please, stop—stop it."

Toya tried to shove him away, but the man strengthened his grip. Hodaka realized that Toya's resistance was real, and he arched his perfect eyebrows slightly. "I thought you were serious when you made the promise."

"I was serious, but I didn't know—"

"I make it a policy never to trust people who break their promises to me, either in business or in private. You've betrayed my trust."

The sound of Hodaka's cold voice ringing in his ears made it impossible to dismiss all this as a bad joke. He was serious. Hodaka was genuinely trying to rape him.

Gay people existed in the world, of course. And in his previous department, Toya had edited books that dealt with homosexuality. Toya considered himself liberal-minded and unprejudiced on that point, but his own tastes were normal.

It was hard for Toya to fit the loveless sex that would result from their bet into his value system. He didn't care about social trends or other people's beliefs: for him, sex could only be with someone he loved.

It was just bizarre this way.

"But—I didn't—" He couldn't get the rest out. All he could do was glare up at Hodaka, protest strong in his eyes. He had always admired him. Being Hodaka's editor had always been his goal. But Hodaka was

betraying Toya's innocent feelings with these despicable acts.

"You're more stubborn than you look. Didn't you agree to let me use you?"

"I did, but—this isn't what I meant."

"What did you think I was asking for?"

Powerless to respond, Toya bit his lip.

"That's too bad," the man murmured. He picked up the belt of Toya's bathrobe and tied it around Toya's wrists, securing his arms behind his back. It was over in an instant; there was no time to resist.

"What are you doing? Untie me!"

"Only if you're good."

"I've had enough of your little joke!"

The terrycloth belt was soft, but it rubbed painfully against his skin every time he moved his arms. Toya's struggles had thrown open his bathrobe and he lay naked under Hodaka's gaze. It was difficult to endure.

"Do you think I wagered my manuscript as a joke?" Hodaka asked and suddenly turned a hand to reach down Toya's body.

"No!" Toya's body arched away, instinctively fearful of the man's touch on his groin. "Please—no more."

Hodaka pinched Toya's nipples between his thin lips and started sucking on them. The strange sensation of a tongue playing over the tiny peaks clouded his mind.

"You want me to stop?" Hodaka asked, but Toya could no longer reproach him. As Hodaka used obscene techniques on Toya's nipple, all he could do was nod.

"Are you sure? You look like you're enjoying it."

He pressed hard against Toya's nipples, as if to prove it to him, and Toya's body trembled in response.

The man was so obscene that Toya felt his resolve weakening. It was more than he could bear, hearing that remarkable voice spit such lewd things at him.

"Answer me," Hodaka whispered, sharply twisting Toya's right nipple.

Toya's body trembled, and a sweet cry that he couldn't believe was his own slipped out of him. He had never imagined he would react like that, and his face flushed. It was shocking that he could make a noise like that.

"I like that answer. Cry a little more."

Hodaka brushed Toya's chest, focusing his attention on his two nipples with urgent enthusiasm.

"No—"

"Why? Because you feel something if I touch you here? Because it makes you feel ashamed, like a woman?"

No. He didn't feel anything like that. Toya was sure of it. But he didn't know how else to express the sensation. He struggled desperately in an attempt to escape, but the more he fought, the more the belt bit into his arms.

"Be good," Hodaka whispered huskily, pressing his lips once more against Toya's chest and sucking on it with a wet noise. He rolled Toya's nipple around on his tongue, and Toya dug his nails into his palms, trying to

drive out the maddening feeling.

“Let—let me...go—” He didn’t like the way Hodaka licked him so noisily. Toya tried desperately to get Hodaka to stop, but it accomplished nothing.

Worse still, the man pulled his face away and pressed his handsome features close to Toya’s ear as he whispered, “I haven’t even touched you yet and you’re already screaming. Your body is much more obedient than you are.”

Toya realized what part of him Hodaka was threatening to touch, and he shook his head, nearly in tears.

Why? He just couldn’t understand it. How could he be responding to all the cruel betrayals Hodaka was subjecting him to?

“You’re so dirty, despite your pretty face.”

“No, you—you’re wrong—”

“Why don’t you tell me what I got wrong?” His obscene words rained down on Toya coldly as Hodaka once more wrapped his fingers around Toya’s member.

“Ah!”

Hodaka’s fingers covered him entirely from the base to the tip and began flicking him playfully.

“Ah! Ngh—”

If he didn’t like it, his body wouldn’t be responding. Toya knew that was the way men’s bodies worked. But the movement of Hodaka’s fingers drove him crazy, and he cried out.

Hodaka played with Toya’s member as the liquid that had begun pooling up in anticipation spread over it. An indecently wet sound reached Toya’s ears,

and he bit down on his lips in shame.

He looked up at Hodaka’s face, but it didn’t look any different from normal.

If he had no hope of escape, Toya at least wanted to avoid letting Hodaka hear that disgusting voice again. The last vestiges of his self-respect urged him to be strong.

“You’re so stubborn. I’m going to have a lot of fun with you,” Hodaka murmured in amusement. He forced Toya’s legs apart and buried his face between them.

“Stop, please!” Toya shouted, but it was too late. “Ngh—mm—”

Hodaka kissed the tip of his member, and that alone was enough to make his hips tremble. But the man didn’t waste any time: he dragged his tongue over Toya’s organ, covering every inch of it.

“Please—no, please...stop—”

Toya’s shame and pleasure wove together as tears flowed over his cheeks. As much as he resolved to feel nothing, to refuse to respond, all of his senses were sharply attuned.

“No—no, no!”

At last the man raised his eyes and, in a voice rich with cruelty, he asked, “You don’t like feeling good? If you’d rather have it rough, I can do that.”

He flipped Toya’s powerless body over, forcing him onto all fours on the bed. When his body was turned over, the belt binding his arms scraped horribly over his skin.

“Open up.”

The man wrapped one arm around his waist and easily pulled him back against him. Something pushed against Toya's most private place.

"What—"

It felt like a finger. The man was prying apart the flesh with one hand and shoving a moistened finger inside him.

"Stop that!"

Toya tried to pull away, but Hodaka jerked him back with one hand around his hips and yanked his finger out. He knelt across Toya's calves, preventing any further movement.

"Next time I'm going in myself. Keep that in mind."

Toya screamed.

A slimy finger, covered in lotion or something, forced open his puckered folds and pushed inside. Toya screamed again; it felt like his body was being ripped in half.

"It hurts," Toya whimpered, powerless, but the man paid no attention to him. "No—stop, please—"

Tears streamed down his cheeks. The man's finger forced him open wider, as if it were digging out the space inside him. Forgetting his resolution, Toya cried out again and again, until his throat was raw, but he was no closer to freedom.

"Ah—ah!"

There were now two fingers inside him, pawing at Toya's insides obscenely. The sensation of being rubbed in a place like that was completely foreign to Toya and he had no idea how to guard against it.

Then the man's other hand took hold of Toya's member, doubling the stimulation to the most receptive parts of his body.

"No—not that—" Toya cried. He had to scream. If he didn't, it would feel too good, and then would know he was crazy.

No, this can't be. I'm only reacting to this because he's touching that place—it was sensitive before—or maybe because he's touching me inside my body.

But each time Hodaka's fingers rolled, massaging inside Toya's body, an inexplicable shudder ran through him. His breathing became shallow and it was impossible to speak. He had to say something to stop Hodaka, but no words came.

"If you're holding me this tight when it's bad, I can't wait to see what you'll do when it gets good."

His words were vicious, trying to cut Toya down and torment him to the core of his being. Tears coursed down Toya's dampened cheeks.

This was a man he had always admired, and now—

"Nngh."

Hodaka's fingers deep inside him, Toya climaxed before he was even aware of it. The warm fluid dirtying his belly was the proof that his desire had broken open.

Hodaka's fingers slipped out of him. His body ached from the haphazard rubbing against his puckered flesh, but Toya somehow managed to hide it.

It's over.

Hodaka untied the belt that had held his arms and Toya collapsed with relief. He sprawled on the bed limply, but Hodaka pulled his hips up again and whispered from behind him, "If this is your first time, it might hurt a little. But I'm sure *you*'ll be able to handle it."

Toya was stunned. But the next moment, he couldn't even cry out in pain.

He thought he had shed all the tears that were in him, but fresh tears trickled from his eyes, wide in shock. He'd thought Hodaka was just being metaphorical when he'd threatened to go in before.

Toya clenched his muscles as hard as he could, trying to prevent the wedge pressing against his puckered folds from entering, but now he was on all fours and Hodaka's organ was sliding in easily.

"Ah—ungh!"

It was extraordinarily painful, but under Hodaka's ministrations, his muscles relaxed. Taking advantage of this, the man made a fresh advance on his body.

"Ah—ahh!"

There was a horrifying pressure. He was overwhelmed by the unpleasant feeling that his stomach was surging up his spine. His elbows buckled and he buried his face in the pillows.

But despite all the pain, he felt something else.

Drool trailed from his mouth and made a stain on the sheets, but Toya's capacity for shame had long since been exhausted.

"I knew you'd be good at this. Look how wet

you are, even though I'm being so hard on you."

When the man moved his hand to the inside of his legs, Toya heard the wet pounding noise of his body.

"...You're wrong."

"You know you're enjoying having me inside you. You can't deny it anymore."

Hodaka's words were like a knife in Toya's brain, cutting it away.

"No—no, let—let me go!"

It doesn't matter—there's no way he can get in. Toya knew full well that no matter how much he tried to train him to accept it, this thing was a lot thicker than a few fingers. Men just weren't meant to stick themselves in that place.

"You are so stubborn."

It felt like Hodaka was laughing against his ear. As the man curled over him, the fabric of the man's clothing rubbed across his naked skin.

The man raping him showed not a hint of affection or arousal; he hadn't even taken off his clothes.

This thought only fueled Toya's wretched state of mind. He vowed to react no more than he already had. He dug his nails into the expensive sheets as he gritted his teeth.

But Hodaka's touch was cunning. His obscene tortures only increased. It was as if he knew exactly where Toya wanted to be touched. He pervaded him adeptly, inside and out, and Toya felt as if his brain would turn to liquid and drip away with the sweat and

fluids running from his body.

"Be a good boy and let me inside," Hodaka coaxed, his voice still mysteriously intoxicating. "I'll hurt you again, like before. Would you like that? Feeling so good?"

It was a temptation Toya found hard to resist in his current state.

He wanted to enjoy himself. He wanted to take it all in, to hold everything inside. Something in his mind told him that it was wrong, but his body had yielded itself to this without him even being aware of it. It had crept into him as the man had rubbed slickly against the burning flesh within him.

"See? I got it all in. Don't you feel so full with me?" Hodaka's voice raked across Toya's eardrums, slightly hoarse.

"It hurts—"

"You sucked me right in. It'll feel better soon."

Shame rushed into him at these humiliating words and Toya clawed at the sheets. "Please. I'm—I'm begging you. Take it out—"

"Really? Well, if you insist," Hodaka murmured and pulled his hips back slightly. But after only this brief movement, rubbing carelessly against Toya's ready flesh, he paused maliciously halfway out. "I'm trying, but your tight little hole won't let me go. I guess you like it better this way."

"No!"

No! No! It isn't true!

Toya shook his head furiously, tousling his pale hair, which spilled over the pillow. Tears of frustration

and sorrow welled up in his eyes. He had never been the victim of such a brutal attempt to eradicate his pride.

"I know you like it now, so stop interrupting," the man said with a cruel laugh as he began moving the part of him buried deep inside Toya.

"N—no, please—"

"Just calm down. You'll feel something besides the pain soon. I know you're up to it."

Up to what? Toya didn't even have time to ask himself this question before he was swept away by the sensation. He was terrified by his reaction. He clutched the sheets in both hands, straining at them. He didn't know how he could ever escape this pain.

But the most terrifying thing of all was that, as he drew one breath after another, the presence of the man held inside his burning flesh was becoming less and less unpleasant.

"Ah—ah!"

Sweat mixed with the liquid he had released a little while ago and dripped down his thighs, making a handful of stains on the sheets.

As Hodaka slowly moved his hips back and forth, Toya's flesh made a damp, vulgar sound.

"Aah...mm—no—ah!"

All he could do was pant as the man pounded into him, in this place he thought no one would ever touch him.

He couldn't believe what was happening. Hodaka was raping him; but worse than that, it felt good.

It was humiliating to endure this. He was a man.

It was unforgivable that his body would respond to sex with another man. He was mortified.

But far from shrinking away, his body warmed to the experience, responding to Hodaka's every whim.

"Please—stop—doing this!"

Hodaka was rubbing against the delicate folds of Toya's flesh, the end of him reaching unbelievably deep. It was a sensation far beyond the one his fingers had given in their earlier play.

No. This doesn't feel good. No. It's not possible.

But try as he might to hold onto these thoughts, an overwhelming wave of pleasure dragged Toya down.

"If you didn't like it, you wouldn't be acting like this. As a man, I'm sure you realize how true that is."

Hodaka gave a low laugh and reached down to Toya's groin to take hold of him. He stroked it playfully, as if trying to eradicate what little remained of Toya's thoughts.

"I—I can't take—any more—"

Everything was in shambles, including his dignity as a man. Toya never imagined that he would scream like that during sex.

"I told you I'd teach you to appreciate men. Didn't you understand what I meant? If you don't know how to read between the lines, you must be a lousy editor."

There was something sensual in Hodaka's voice even as he said this, and Toya was lost in the fog of his evaporating thoughts.

"What I meant was that since your body wanted a man so badly, I would train you."



Toya no longer had the mental resources to understand what Hodaka was saying to him.

“Look how much you’ve enjoyed being taken from behind. You’re so perverted. I’m amazed you’ve made it this far in life without ever spreading your legs for a man.”

Toya realized then that at some point the man had stopped touching him. But nectar continued to drip from the ripened fruit of his desire anyway.

“That feels good, doesn’t it? And if I do this—it’s mind-blowing, isn’t it?”

Toya whimpered, shaking his head again and again, pressing it into the sheets. He could never acknowledge such a humiliating fact.

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you that it’s wrong to lie? But you lied before, too, didn’t you?” Hodaka whispered by his ear.

Toya didn’t know which lie he meant. He had told so many lies in this bed. All to protect his self-respect.

“I like you more than I thought. You just keep getting more interesting.”

“Ahh—”

Hodaka pressed sharply against a spot inside him and Toya cried out sweetly. His body shuddered at the obscene feeling, unlike anything he’d felt so far, and he climaxed. Fluid soaked into the sheets and covered Toya’s belly.

That was good.

He never thought he would enjoy having sex with a man, but it was unbelievably good. In a corner

of his mind, part of him was comparing it to sex with Miwa.

“Ahh...mmh.”

It was so good he couldn’t deny himself anymore. Without realizing it, Toya began to move his hips in time with the man’s movements, growing hungry for an even deeper sensation. His reason and shame were both lost. All he could think of now was how much he wanted Hodaka.

Seeing Toya gripped by his sordid desires, Hodaka gave a slight smile.

“Do you like...this?” He jabbed the sensitive spot and Toya nodded, driven to even greater perversion than before, to ecstasy. He felt as if his body was softening like butter as Hodaka stimulated his sensitive flesh.

“Say it.”

“It’s—it feels good.”

The pleasure made him inarticulate. He wanted Hodaka to be brutal. To keep pounding at him until his body drained. To hurt him.

“What do you want?”

“More—”

This was humiliating. Toya ordinarily would have bitten his tongue off rather than say that, but he wasn’t thinking anything now. It just slipped out.

“That’s what a man likes to hear. I didn’t even have to teach you that. Begging for it must come naturally for you.”

Hodaka’s voice cracked as he bent over Toya.

“Aah, you’re holding me so tight,” he said, as if scolding him, but it wasn’t something Toya could

control; it was only his first time. The man gave a grim smile and wiped the sweat from his forehead, then planted a kiss on Toya's spine as he bent over him.

"There's your reward," Hodaka whispered, then began slamming against Toya's body violently.

"Ngh!"

He couldn't withstand it. Toya ejaculated and, simultaneously, clamped down on the foreign object inside his body. Hodaka gave a low moan, and something hot flooded Toya's body.

When the man pulled himself out of Toya a few moments later, a thick liquid flowed from the place they had been connected. The fullness that had pervaded his body until then slipped away and the strength left his body, his thoughts full of dissatisfaction. Hodaka turned Toya's weary body over and, taking a handful of hair, forced him to look at him.

"I was right about you. You're obscene."

After the wave of pleasure receded, there was nothing left but regret to weigh on him. Toya couldn't remember what he'd said in the heat of the moment. But he couldn't take any more of this. He wanted to throw everything away, his job included.

Hodaka brushed away the hair stuck to Toya's forehead with a finger.

"Please stop."

"No. You promised to stay all night."

This time, he couldn't even resist as Hodaka pinned him down, his legs held tight.

Tears came once more to his eyes as he was penetrated, but the pain was nothing compared to last

time. His body took the man in, not wanting to resist. Realizing that was the most terrifying thing of all.

"You belong to me until dawn. You will think only about me."

He couldn't refuse the man's order. This time, he was penetrated without so much as a stray touch. But he was already prepared, and liquid oozed from him.

Toya learned for the first time of his perversion and he despaired, closing his eyes.

Hodaka whispered against his ear with a cruel gentleness. "The man you really are—it's so much dirtier than even I suspected. You should think about that."

The skin of the person sleeping next to him was incredibly warm. The body was unlike any Toya knew. The most striking thing was that, unlike the body of a woman, there was no softness. This body had the firmness of supple skin stretched over slightly tense muscles.

Someone was playing with his hair.

Toya caught his breath and froze as soon as he realized who it was.

"Are you finally awake?" Hodaka was looking at him with his usual smile. "You were clinging to me in your sleep. I didn't want to push you away."

"Why am I—?" He must have fallen asleep here with Hodaka.

"It was so good that you lost your memory? You flatter me."

One by one, the memories rose again to the surface at Hodaka's merciless words.

That's right, I was—!

Toya put a hand to his mouth then hastily tried to climb out of the bed, but the pain in his body wouldn't let him. A dull pain lingered in his lower body, reminding him vividly of what had happened last night.

Hodaka held Toya's chin and forced him to look at him. "Look, you cried so much your eyes are all puffy. You spoiled your lovely face," he murmured with an air of regret.

"You were the one who made me cry, sir!" Toya yelled, angrily shaking off his hand. It was all he could do to keep from swatting Hodaka's hand away. "Why...why did you have to—"

Hodaka looked at Toya as if he had posed the question purely for his own benefit. He shrugged. "I was keeping my word."

Toya hadn't wanted a complicated answer, but this was ridiculous. "That's it?"

"What more would there be?"

Toya's response stuck in his throat. "I—I—" He was in complete disarray, and the words wouldn't come out. But Hodaka never lacked for a vicious contribution.

"You should thank me for showing you such a good time. Your normal stoic look is all well and good, but you're a lot more attractive in bed."

"Excuse me?" Toya shouted. All the things that had happened last night bloomed again in his mind. It wasn't just that he'd been molested all last night, but in

the midst of those acts, Hodaka had hurled brutal insults at him, things that drove Toya crazy just to remember.

Hodaka smiled at Toya's silent response.

"If you want to take a shower, I could give you a hand."

"No thank you!" Toya shouted at Hodaka, giving his emotions free reign as he stood up rapidly.

Instantly, the fluids the man had released inside him came trickling back out. The realization that he had been raped burst across Toya's mind, and he went pale. His knees shaking, he slumped against the wall.

The stuff dripping out of his body broke him. He had wanted to believe that it had all been a bad dream.

Chapter 5

The reflection he saw in the car window looked unbelievably frail. Toya glowered bitterly at it.

The sky threatened rain, depressing him even more. The commuter trains would be empty at this time of day, but Toya didn't want to move any more than he had to; he drew closer to the door.

After this morning's unpleasant conversation with Hodaka, he'd fled the room. His body was worn out, like a bundle of rags, but he couldn't stay there. When he got home, he burrowed into bed and slept like a log for several hours, but his exhaustion just wouldn't go away.

He had projects at work that needed finishing. The printers would be coming for them tomorrow night, so he had wanted to spend today working on them. But the thought of going to work today was abnormally depressing. Obviously he was tired, but it wasn't just the physical effort. His pride as a man had been deeply wounded.

I can't believe it.

It was more than just the fact that Hodaka, who Toya had admired so much, had acted that way, or that he had made Toya like it. It was the fact that Toya had responded to it and climaxed again and again.

No...it's not just that, either.

Hodaka had run roughshod over the respect Toya had for him. Maybe it was childish of him to complain about such a thing, but Toya loved those stories, and he had cherished feelings of respect and admiration for Kai Hodaka, the man that created them.

What had his face looked like when Hodaka, whom he so adored, had held him?

When left to himself, Toya had very few sexual urges. He hadn't even gone after Miwa with much passion. When he thought about his life after marriage and children, he was sure he would simply give up sex.

But last night, I—

No, no more. He didn't want to see Hodaka ever again. How could he work with someone who had done that to him? He didn't want to go to the office, either—he just wanted to run away from everything.

Suddenly the cell phone in his pocket started vibrating. Toya dug it out. He pushed the button to get to his text messages, and Miwa's name flashed before his eyes.

"I tried texting you yesterday, but I guess you didn't get it. Are you okay?" the message read. A piercing pain gripped his heart. He had forgotten to send his daily message to Miwa yesterday. He never had the chance.

Had he betrayed Miwa?

No, it wasn't that bad. He had had to do it for work: Miwa was the only one he loved. He had acted unfaithful, but he hadn't betrayed her.

Toya tried to justify it as using his body for

business. It felt like a violation of his principles, but if he didn't do it, he knew he would continue to blame himself forever. If he didn't treat it as an accident, he didn't think he could live his life.

As he dwelled on these clashing emotions, Toya stepped mechanically out of the train station and passed through the ticket checker. The dark gray sky mirrored Toya's mood. An autumn wind blew past him, and drops of rain wet his skin.

"Good morning, Toya!" Yoshimi shouted to him, and Toya jerked his head up. She was one of the first to arrive. There were a few other people from the editorial department already at their desks. Several memos were waiting for him.

"Morning."

Yoshimi stared at him intently, then inclined her head slightly. The gesture terrified Toya, as if she could see the marks of the things Hodaka had done to him all over his body.

"Is there something wrong?"

"No, it's just...you don't seem to be yourself today."

"I guess. I didn't really get much sleep."

"It shows. But that's okay—I think it's sexy when a man's a little languorous."

Toya smiled grimly at the misguided praise. Makiyara arrived then to get some coffee, his face bright as he interrupted them.

"Hey there, Sakurai. How's it going with Hodaka? You two had a meeting yesterday, right?" he asked in a cheerful voice. Toya grunted ambiguously

and nodded. "Keep working him. We're trying to publish this year, remember."

Toya made another ambiguous noise, wishing with all his might that this conversation would end quickly. Just hearing Hodaka's name made him feel sick and angry. It would probably be impossible to keep working with Hodaka after this. No one could be expected to work normally with a man who had done something like that to them.

But how could he say, especially now, that he wanted to be taken off Hodaka's project because of some sort of weird sexual harassment? There was no one he could talk to about something so ridiculous. No one would believe him if he told them that Hodaka had made a horrible bet and had sex with Toya; had pretty much raped him, in fact. Yoshimi was the only one who seemed likely to be sympathetic, but she had already given Toya plenty of warning, and he had ignored it.

"The work and the author are separate. You shouldn't get too worked up over Mister Hodaka."

"Yes, I know. It'll be fine."

Toya felt nausea rising and put a hand over his mouth. A mark from the restraints, still on his arm, flashed in front of his eyes.

What did that man do to me? How can I deal with him?

He just wanted to forget it all. But he remembered every detail.

Even the smell of Hodaka's sweat and fluids.

"Are you all right, Toya? You don't look so good."

Miwa was walking beside him. Toya slowly lifted his head. His girlfriend was looking at him, worry plain on her face.

He tried to manage a smile, but it only hurt his cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little out of it."

"Are the projects that hard this month? Or is it because of Hodaka?"

Toya put a hand to his mouth in dismay at the sound of his name. How had she known?

Catching sight of his reflection in a shop window, he saw that he looked appalling. The sunlight may have contributed to that, but if he looked like that, it was no wonder that Miwa was worried.

"That's it, isn't it? Do you think he's not going to give you a manuscript?"

"No, it's not that. I just drank a little too much at a job thing last night." Thinking more clearly, he realized there was no way that Miwa could have found out about that night, but hearing Hodaka's name destroyed Toya's cool rationality. Cold sweat was running down his back from the anxiety. He really should have quit. He shouldn't have agreed to go on this date with Miwa. He didn't think he'd betrayed her, but he found it incredibly hard to look her in the eyes right now.

Even if he hadn't meant to do it, her boyfriend had sold his body to another man.

To say "sold" may have been misleading, but it was something like that. If she found out, even gentle Miwa would scorn him. And he knew it would hurt her terribly.

So he had to lie.

"It's so hard on you working with him."

"I guess."

"No, it is. I've never seen you look this down in the dumps before. Oh no! He's not taking advantage of you, is he?"

That wasn't taking advantage: it was perverted torture.

He kept having dreams about that night. He wanted to forget, he wanted to rip the man's smell out of his memory, so he showered until his body was swollen. He scrubbed until the skin was raw and red.

It wasn't true that he had been taken by Hodaka and liked it. He wasn't obscene like him. He had just been doing his job, and there was nothing to be ashamed about. He was a completely ordinary person, just like everyone else.

But he had these dreams—

"Toya? Hey, Toya!"

"Sorry. What is it?"

"You said you'd come with me to the bookstore. It's right over there."

The bookstore was big, taking up the entire fourth floor of a building. It was full of students and office workers, probably because it was late afternoon.

There were stacks of new releases on the sales floor, and the women on their way home from work would pick these up and leaf through them, wondering whether to buy them. Some high school girls came over to the display.

"Hey, it's the new book by Kai Hodaka!"

That set off a commotion. That part of the store was instantly packed.

"Sorry I took so long!" Miwa tapped him on the shoulder cheerfully, and Toya came rushing back to his senses.

"Hey, that's a Kai Hodaka book those girls are buying, isn't it? He's popular even with kids like them."

"I guess."

"Look at how many people there are. You guys should really try and get something from him."

"I suppose so."

Miwa was right. Why else had he sacrificed his body if not to get a manuscript from Hodaka? Now that this had happened, it was more important than ever to get it.

But that was a pointless argument. Even if he had enough disregard for his own dignity, he didn't have the confidence to work with Hodaka face to face. He hadn't buttered Hodaka up enough to continue being professional about this.

It would have been easier if he didn't feel so completely submissive towards him.

After a meal that turned to ash in his mouth, he and Miwa parted, and he went back to his apartment.

"This isn't going to work."

He couldn't keep going like this. It was too painful to go out with Miwa while he felt this way.

Toya took off his suit jacket, threw his necktie into a corner, and fell face first onto his bed. As he rearranged his pillows, his hand brushed a book he had

left beside them.

It was Hodaka's debut novel. He had been reading it before bed.

If Hodaka didn't write such good books, if Toya didn't have any of them, he never would have met him. This never would have happened.

Seized by fury, Toya picked the book up to throw it against the floor. But he couldn't do it.

"Damn it!" Toya gripped the book in his hands and just stood there for a long moment. He could still recall it all vividly: the emotions he felt when he read Hodaka's books, his tears. He couldn't so easily forget all that.

In the dim light, Toya flipped through the pages of the book. His favorite part was the scene in the last ten pages: it made his chest feel tight and tears well up in his eyes. No matter how many times he read it, the emotions never faded.

Damn it, I can't do it. I can't give up Hodaka's books.

In that case, he would have to stop assuming that the writing reflected something of the author's human nature and keep the two strictly separate. It was Hodaka's writing that he loved, and not the man himself. He had respected Hodaka, but that no longer mattered. He had to overlook the kind of man the author was. He would have to confront Hodaka in order to get his hands on any stories. That left just one choice open to Toya: in order to accomplish his goal, he would have to be strong and face Hodaka again.

Because despite what he'd experienced, he still

wanted to read Hodaka's stories. He wouldn't give up the right to read his newest work.

Toya knew he was being an idiot.

"You actually came back."

Normally writers seem bored, or as if they have too much time on their hands.

This time, Toya secured an appointment with Hodaka so easily he was shocked.

Just like four days ago, he was led into the living room. Toya was still mostly firm.

"Did you think that you would never see me again?"

"That's right. I thought you were never coming back. But I'm glad you did."

Toya knit his eyebrows at the man's response. Hodaka laughed loudly, perhaps taking this small act as sensitivity.

"I'd like it if you would stop joking like that. It doesn't contribute to a very pleasant working environment," Toya proclaimed, mustering as disinterested a voice as he could. But Hodaka wasn't going to give up easily.

"That wasn't very nice. I was serious. Our agreement to give me rights to your body for one night was carried out to the letter. You have no right to complain."

"I told you that I didn't know what you wanted. It wasn't like you, sir."

"I'd love for you tell me what is like me." Hodaka's mouth twisted into a sarcastic smile and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I honestly respected you, and...I was really looking forward to working with you. You destroyed all that."

He'd come to talk about business. He hadn't intended to berate the man, but seeing the change in Hodaka, he couldn't restrain himself.

"You're the one who mistook me for a noble human being. Don't act like it's my fault that you were wrong."

Hodaka was right; it was impossible to argue.

"I only took the bet because you wanted a manuscript so badly. I wanted to get to know you as one human being to another, without business getting in the way. Otherwise I would have sent you packing long ago."

It was true that if he'd thought it was for business, he never would have wagered a manuscript. Hodaka was more professional than that. He never would have let the unpredictable outcome of a bet determine his writing schedule.

Toya wasn't sure what to say to that, and bit his lip in lieu of a response.

Hodaka stood beside Toya and bent over to murmur into his ear. "It doesn't really bother you that your ideal vision of me has been destroyed. Because it doesn't matter what an author is really like, as long as their books are good."

Toya was startled by how accurate this was.



"I think you're more upset at seeing what *you're* really like."

His voice was demonic in its beauty.

"Because what you really are is a whore who'll spread his legs for any man who asks."

The teacup in Toya's hand began to clatter. He tried several times to set the cup down, making small puddles of cool black tea in the saucer. "Can we please talk seriously?"

"If you want to see whether I'm lying or not, why not try our wager again?" the man whispered in a horribly gentle voice as he squeezed Toya's shoulders. "You make the rules, Toya."

Toya's heart and body were riveted in place at the sound of his name in his ear.

He couldn't move.

"If you want my manuscript so badly, let's play some pool." Hodaka stood up again and looked down at Toya. He smirked. "But it's a little unfair to bet a whole book on one game. I can usually write twenty pages in one night. So every time you win, I'll write twenty pages."

"And what happens if I lose?"

"The same thing as before, obviously. I get to do whatever I want to you for one night."

Toya no longer had the resources to judge if this suggestion was tempting or not.

"Why the hell do you want me?" His agitation was starting to show in his words. Hodaka laughed softly at that.

"Because you're interesting. What more reason do I need?"

Interesting? What about him had piqued this arrogant man's interest? Hodaka always lied like that. He must have thought that Toya wouldn't see through it.

"But surely there are beautiful young women—I mean, I'm a man."

"There's no reason to discriminate. Half the human race is male. If you exclude them from consideration, all you're doing is denying human potential." Hodaka's face was aggravatingly detached as he brought Toya to his knees with his words. Hodaka would sleep with whoever he wanted to, whether he loved them or not.

Toya realized that he was probably nothing more than a living blow-up doll for this man who had everything. Maybe if Toya had proposed something else at the beginning, Hodaka wouldn't be sticking to this ridiculous condition with such tenacity. But now that there was a precedent, it was over.

He'd never imagined Hodaka was this sort of man. He would have said he was an easygoing person who didn't often reveal his emotions. But his distant eyes observed others. His skill at seeing straight into people's hearts was evident everywhere. Hodaka knew that Toya would accept the wager. He had known it and was testing him.

In that case, I'll get the manuscript by force of will alone if I have to, Toya decided. He might have to betray his principles, but it was for work. That would be justification enough.

There was no longer any doubt that they would have sex once or twice more, and then Hodaka would

get tired of it. This almost defeatist thought helped him make his decision.

"All right. I agree."

"Really?" Hodaka looked content and gestured for Toya to follow him. "I'll give you a lesson before the game today. You're at too much of a disadvantage otherwise."

It might have been a trap, for all Toya knew. But at the moment he didn't have any other choice but to believe him.

"Let's start with the break shot."

"Okay."

Toya took off his suit jacket and hung it on the back of a chair. Just as he was about to break, Hodaka told him to stop.

"What is it?"

"You need to improve your form a little," he said, standing behind Toya. Hodaka put both his legs between Toya's and bent over him from behind. "Good, your arm should be at a right angle. Put your hand here." He squeezed Toya's hand, holding the cue stick, with his own.

Toya nervously leaned across the table. His heart was pounding, and he prayed Hodaka wouldn't notice his distress.

"What's wrong? Do you want me to take you like this?"

"Of course not!" It was a stupid joke, but after recent events, he couldn't let it slide.

"Then don't be so tense. Put your left hand on the table. Good."

Hodaka's luscious tenor tickled Toya's ears.

It made hardly any sound, but it danced across Toya's eardrums, a string of slithering notes. Hodaka's breath touched his earlobe, and Toya shuddered. He didn't know what to do.

"Your right arm is at a good angle. Now hit the balls and try to get the one-ball in a pocket."

"Okay."

Toya's voice was steady. He set up his shot meticulously before lightly striking the balls with his cue. With a crack, the cue ball shot forward and easily dropped the one-ball into a pocket.

"That's amazing!"

Toya's quiet voice rose in excitement, and he turned around automatically. When he did, his eyes met Hodaka's, looking down at him coldly. He obviously never dropped his guard against others. In his sharp gaze, Toya felt an impenetrable barrier around Hodaka. Toya dropped his eyes to the floor, embarrassed by his outburst.

"Just as I thought. You have potential." Hodaka put a cigarette to his lips and smiled as if nothing had happened. "Practice a little, then we'll start the game."

"All right."

They each took banking shots to determine who would go first. Toya won.

First he struck the cue ball and sent the target ball, the one-ball, into a pocket. Next was the two. The break shot had been good, so even a beginner like Toya could make the shot. The three-ball was tougher. He couldn't get a clear shot at the ball, and the cue ball barely touched it. It finally stopped against the cushion

after hitting several other balls and losing speed.

It would be hard for Hodaka, too. It had stopped in a tricky spot. Just taking a shot at the cue ball wouldn't reach the target ball, so he had to calculate the best angle to hit it from, and how to leave it in a good position to hit the next ball.

But Hodaka didn't look at all concerned as he took up his stick. His form was beautiful as he hit the cue ball and sent the three-ball sailing into a pocket. It was so perfectly executed that Toya found he had been holding his breath. Next were the four- and five-balls, and the spectacle unfolded splendidly, as expected. Even Hodaka's form as he chalked his stick was ideal. Toya was forced to recognize just how perfect Hodaka was—except for his personality, anyway.

As for Toya, his form may have improved, but it didn't make him remarkably better. Despite his practice, Hodaka handily won the next two games.

"I'll take my reward now," Hodaka declared casually, drawing up abruptly behind Toya. His cue stick fell to the floor with a crack and rolled away.

Toya gasped. Hodaka's hand rested on the fabric covering Toya's groin. "W—wait a second."

"No." His voice was devoid of hunger. It was dry and cold.

"But my clothes will get dirty." Toya tried to sound calm, but the crack at the end made his panic clear.

"I can lend you others."

It was horrible to be groped by a man who felt no desire for him, but despite that, lust filled Toya, warmth

suffusing him, betraying his thoughts. He hadn't hated Hodaka before, and if Toya hadn't found him exciting now, his body wouldn't have reacted. But it did.

"Just—just wait."

Toya realized suddenly that Hodaka wanted to make his defeat clear.

His fingers teased Toya's crotch through his clothes, but he soon undid Toya's belt and they fell to the floor. He tugged off his underwear, laying Toya's groin bare, quivering as it displayed his reaction. He wanted to cry from the humiliation of it. But he wouldn't cry here. He gritted his teeth.

Hodaka's silky fingers drew out his pleasure little by little, unearthing the desire that slept deep inside him.

"How can you already be wet?" Hodaka laughed next to his ear, and the indistinct feeling of breath tickling his earlobe tormented Toya anew. He felt an electric charge running down his spine. "You weren't planning on saving yourself for marriage, were you?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Toya asked, his voice catching. It wasn't fair to make him think about Miwa.

"Then maybe you can tell me why you get so excited when all I do is touch you."

"How should I know?" Toya gasped fiercely.

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know why...

"You like men that much?"

A cowardly shudder ran over Toya's body at this direct question. "Of course not!" Toya shook his head, shaking his hair into tangles to deny the accusation. How

could that be? For all the twenty-seven years of his life, he had been sure that his tastes were normal. If he was refused that certainty now, Toya felt like there would be nothing left of him.

"Why don't we let your body tell us?" He gripped Toya's member as if it was a cruel joke. Shocked, Toya tried to break out of Hodaka's arms. But he was powerless against the constant stimulation of Hodaka's tight grip on his most sensitive organ.

He was not withering under the degradation—he was enjoying it. He cursed himself for that. He gritted his teeth, determined to not make any noise. Hodaka laughed behind him, as if he realized what he was doing.

"You like it when a man touches you like this, don't you? That's why you came to see me today."

"No—" Just having the small slit at the tip fondled was enough to make liquid pool up in it and dirty Hodaka's hand. It was disgustingly sticky and thick, striking new fear into Toya.

"Look how much you're giving me," Hodaka said with a lewd pleasure he had never shown before. He turned Toya's body around easily and laid him against the pool table. Then he kneeled in front of him.

The edge of the table dug painfully into Toya's hips. He searched for something to hold onto, clutching at the felt covering the table.

"It would be a pain to have the table resurfaced," Hodaka said sarcastically.

Toya was unprepared for the feel of the man's tongue so soon after he'd spoken. He was bewildered by

the incredible pleasure it brought.

"Stop, sir!"

Hodaka licked up the liquid that beaded up, his elaborate caresses intensifying.

This was Kai Hodaka, down on his knees in front of him. Just the thought of it loosened Toya's grip on reality.

"Mm—ah! Nngh—sir—"

Being forced to stand as he received this stimulation intensified Toya's pleasure so greatly he thought his hips might crack. Blood rushed into Toya's lips as he bit down on them. He couldn't stop a gasp from slipping out of him.

"You chose to betray your fiancée and have sex with a man. Or does self-control just mean nothing to you in the face of your lust? You're worse than a whore."

"No—"

He wasn't betraying Miwa. All he wanted was Hodaka's manuscript.

He still believed that if he traded his body without any emotion, it wouldn't be a betrayal. He loved Miwa. He didn't want to lose her love or her trust. But a pleasure very different from the kind that Miwa could give him dominated Toya now. Soon, he was unable to think about any of that, consumed by the pleasure.

"Can you tell me why you're enjoying this so much, then?"

Toya wished he knew.

He was the same as he had always been. There was no change in the skin that covered his body, but

beneath that thin membrane, something was bubbling to the surface.

Why did he feel like he was drowning in pleasure, as if he was sinking into quicksand?

Chapter 6

The third night came not long after that. He had come on business, bringing news about overseas publishing contracts and reprinting, and had been swept into another game.

Toya bit his lip as he watched the nine-ball fall into a pocket with a crisp sound. The blood drained from his face as he calmly took in the situation.

“Did you come here to lose on purpose?” Hodaka wore a look of amazement as he watched Toya’s clumsy shots.

“Of course not!” He thought he’d gotten better. He’d bought a book about pool; he’d drilled the rules into his head and studied how to calculate the mechanics of the balls. But even so, he’d still lost spectacularly. Even he felt sorry for himself. He bit down on his lips till they turned white.

Hodaka placed his finger on Toya’s upper lip. Toya cringed at the sensation as his index finger traced softly over his lips. Hodaka smiled with amusement at Toya’s response.

“You’ll cut your lip if you’re not careful.”

“I don’t care.”

“It’s not very classy to make someone taste blood when they kiss you.”

Toya's cheeks flushed at Hodaka's blunt objection. He'd never kissed Toya anyway.

"I wonder what I should do with you today."

Hodaka pushed him up against the wall, cutting off his escape. He held Toya's arms and raised them over his head, pinning him against the wall. Toya cried out in surprise.

Holding Toya's wrists tightly, the man nudged Toya's legs apart with one knee. Hodaka's leanly muscled thigh pressed against his groin, and Toya sighed in spite of himself.

Hodaka rubbed against Toya's crotch with his thigh calculatingly. The smooth circular movement he made was like a hurried caress. Toya felt his hips giving way beneath him.

"Mister Hodaka—"

"Even this gets you off?" he asked scornfully, and Toya felt himself surrendering. He would collapse under this; it would break him. He felt his reason leaving him. He felt like he was tumbling down a hill.

Toya looked up at Hodaka, eyes wet but unable to glare, and he dropped his gaze again quickly. "No."

"I bet you're hard already. Let me see."

His voice tempted Toya. That voice that brought others under his sway, that made it impossible for Toya to hold himself together.

"Show it to me."

Toya shook his head stubbornly. He didn't want Hodaka to see, because he really was excited. Hodaka's terrible treatment had already made him hard. It took nothing but insults and apathetic touches to turn him on.

He was nothing but a plaything to Hodaka, but Toya couldn't help but be excited.

Toya turned his damp eyes to Hodaka, begging him. If his body was going to be destroyed, he wanted at least to keep control over his reason. If he couldn't do that, there would be nothing left of him.

"Then why don't you tell me how you feel? I'll give you a reward if you do that."

After so much temptation, Toya could no longer resist. He wanted to confess everything. He wanted to say that he was dripping wet and desperate to climax. But at the same time, Toya knew that if he gave voice to those things, he would never be the same again. So he resisted.

Just then, the phone rang. Toya jumped at the sound. Hodaka looked at him, then excused himself to answer it. Sinking to the floor, Toya felt that he had been freed all too easily.

Hodaka was right. There was already fluid pooling at the tip; he was already damp.

Hodaka would probably take him again today. And the man's skills would flood his entire body...

Am I looking forward to this?

Toya's cheeks burned with shame at this sudden realization. How could he be looking forward to it? He hated himself. He was supposed to hate being touched by this man more than anything.

Hodaka returned with soft footsteps. "Sorry, but something's come up. I'll let you out of it today."

Toya looked up at him blurrily, not clearly understanding the meaning of his words.

"If you're having trouble walking, I can call a taxi. What do you want?"

He was free. As relief came over him, violent, confusing emotions flooded through him.

He was...disappointed.

"No, I can get home by myself." Toya felt like he was hearing his own words from somewhere far away. His body ached. His groin was on fire, and his reason seemed to be slipping away.

No. It can't be that.

He hadn't been looking forward to it. He never would have wanted to sleep with this man.

"I look forward to our next game," Hodaka whispered, pressing a light kiss against the sheen of Toya's sweat-covered forehead.

He hated this. He cursed this body that got so excited when sleeping with Hodaka.

"Mister Makihara, would you teach me how to play pool?"

Makihara, who had been working on a proposal, looked up at Toya, wide-eyed. "Pool? But the last time I invited you to play you just brushed me off."

"Don't ask me why, but I have to learn how to play."

Pool clubs had been popular about ten years ago. Makihara had learned the game back then and still enjoyed it, but there weren't many young guys like Toya who enjoyed playing. Toya had turned down every one

of his invitations.

"No problem—but you don't look so good. If you've got so much free time, you should go home and get some rest."

"I'm fine. I think I just look sick because the weather's so bad today."

"Maybe. Is working with Hodaka starting to get to you?"

Toya was momentarily taken aback by Makihara's perceptiveness.

It would be such a relief to just toss his pride out the window and tell Makihara everything. To tell him that his business with Hodaka was being conducted with his body. But Toya couldn't say it. He was sure that if he confessed, the last shreds of dignity that Hodaka's contemptuous abuse had left him would disappear.

"Everything's...fine. We just haven't been getting along very well, that's all."

"Hey, now. You *are* going to get something publishable this year, right?"

"I think that's going to be impossible, but I'm aiming for early next year. That's why I need to learn pool."

Makihara took a long look at Toya and shook his head skeptically. "I don't get it."

"I made a bet with Mister Hodaka. If I beat him at a game of pool, he'll write something for us."

"It's not like you to get so wrapped up in a project that you would accept something so outlandish."

Maybe Makihara was right, but Toya had been the one to suggest the bet, and he was zero-for-three

against Hodaka so far. He had gotten out of the sex he owed for his latest loss, thanks that unexpected phone call taking Hodaka away on business, so that worked out to two times that Hodaka had taken his body. But at some point an implicit understanding had formed between them that if Toya never won, Hodaka would never write anything. Toya wholeheartedly regretted entering into this bargain.

He wanted to work with Hodaka. He wanted him to write something new. That was why he had to win. If he lost, Hodaka would just sleep with him again.

He was scared of himself. He didn't want to sleep with Hodaka, but when it didn't happen the last time, he had been so disappointed. Toya couldn't trust himself since he realized that, so he had to win next time, no matter what.

He had only had sex with Hodaka twice, but he saw the things they'd done much more often in his dreams.

He thought that if he threw himself into his work, he might be able to forget. He'd taken on a lot of extra projects, only briefly going home to sleep.

But even then Toya's dreams were of Hodaka.

And in his dreams, Hodaka was having sex with him.

He was struck by a maddening passion and impatience, he writhed, and in the end he yielded to him. He dreamt of how much he wanted Hodaka, even as he cried.

I must be crazy.

The shock of being forced two times by a man

he didn't love must have broken something in his mind. He didn't feel as if he'd betrayed his girlfriend, but something inside him ached with guilt. He didn't know how much of this he was doing as a part of his job, and how much was his personal desire. If he recognized his pleasure at being forced by Hodaka, it would no longer be slavery and would become simple satisfaction. The next time he slept with Hodaka, it would be outright betrayal.

"How are you going to improve your pool technique when you look that tired? I can't believe the ridiculous demands Hodaka makes sometimes." Makihara shook his head and patted Toya on the back. Toya was surprised that a part of him wanted to shrink away even from contact as well-meaning as that. He felt a weariness weighing at the bottom of his heart.

Toya was aiming for the nine-ball. Hodaka should have dominated the game, but by some odd chance he missed sinking the eight-ball.

Toya picked his angle for the difficult eight-ball shot, and then sank the nine with precision. The stifling tension disappeared, and he wiped away the sweat that had gathered unnoticed on his forehead.

"Impressive."

It had been a good idea to go into this game ready to give it his all. In their fourth match, Toya just barely managed to eke out his first victory.

"You're going to write something for me now,

right? Just like you promised.”

“Indeed. I’ll get your twenty pages to you.”

Toya was overjoyed. It looked like all his practicing with Makihara had paid off. He had had a bit of background in the game already, but he never imagined the day would come when he would beat Hodaka.

He’d heard that Hodaka never made outlines or gave plot summaries to his editors. He never told them anything until he’d handed in a complete manuscript. Toya had a long wait before he could read this new story, but this victory was a big first step.

“There was something strange about your form today, though. Are you letting someone besides me teach you?”

Toya had noticed a while ago that in their “private” meetings, Hodaka spoke more arrogantly. He didn’t find it unpleasant, though; he took it as a sign that Hodaka was letting him in. “Yes, Mister Makihara. He enjoys pool.”

“You mean that you slept with Mister Makihara every time you lost to him, too? You didn’t waste any time finding yourself another man,” Hodaka said mockingly as he took hold of Toya’s chin.

“Do you think I would make such an outrageous bet with anyone but you?”

“How should I know?” Hodaka gave a small laugh and pushed Toya’s body back against the pool table. It looked like something had rubbed Hodaka the wrong way, but Toya didn’t know what it was. “Maybe I should collect what you owe me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I had to take a rain check after the last match, remember? So why don’t I collect right now?”

Hodaka seemed indifferent as he took hold of Toya’s arms and pulled him closer. Even now as he displayed such repulsive behavior, he wouldn’t allow Toya any resistance. A relationship clearly based on dominance had been cemented between the two of them.

“It’s enough that your form has been perverted by being with some other man,” he whispered softly next to his ear. “You want to take a shower, don’t you? Come with me.”

Hodaka passed the guest bathroom, dragging Toya to his own bathroom next to the master bedroom on the second floor. Steam billowed from the bathtub as it filled with hot water.

Toya had thought the guest bathroom was huge, but it was nothing compared to the master bathroom. The sea was visible from the large window, giving the room a sense of escape. Being on the fortieth floor, they couldn’t open the window, but Toya could see a large glass-walled terrace from the bathroom.

“Take off your clothes. I’ll wash you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can do it myself.” Ridiculous. As if Toya would ever want Hodaka to do something like that.

“Why not? I have to take a shower, too. Or did you want me to take you with my clothes on like usual?” How did Hodaka always manage to say something to make Toya feel even more humiliated?

"I prefer to be by myself."

Cornered in the bathroom, Toya turned on the shower with resignation. He squeezed some soap onto the sponge that had been prepared for him and lathered up a mountain of bubbles. Through the window, he could see the dark night sea. This would have been a romantic fantasy for a couple who loved each other, but for Toya it was just disgusting.

He covered his body in bubbles. He wanted to scrub away the stain on his soul, which allowed itself to be overpowered by the man's whispers. He scrubbed hard at his skin.

While he sat soaking in the bathtub, Toya felt his anticipation rising. He didn't want to move. He closed his eyes and let the hot water wash over him.

Just then, the door opened, and he was face to face with Hodaka, still fully dressed.

"Is something wrong?"

"No."

Apparently he had been soaking for such a long time that Hodaka had gotten suspicious. Toya stood up hurriedly, but his legs tangled together and he lost his balance.

"Ah!"

Hodaka's hand shot out and held Toya up.

"Thank you."

If they stayed like this, Hodaka's clothes would get all wet. Toya tried to push himself away, but Hodaka wouldn't let him.

"Are you feeling all right? Or are you excited?"

"It's nothing. My foot just slipped."

"You should be careful." His face could be so gentle that it instantly commanded the love of others, but when he held Toya's body, he was no better than a tyrant.

"Sir, please—no more."

Holding Toya in his arms, Hodaka bit Toya's earlobe, then slipped his tongue into his ear.

"Ah!"

"Do you think you can make those noises and expect me to not react?"

The sultry, tantalizing sound against his eardrums was indecent. Toya felt as if his legs would give way beneath him.

Hodaka trailed his hands down from Toya's shoulder blades, his fingers making stuttering progress over the clean, wet skin. After he'd fully appreciated the touches, Hodaka lathered Toya's lower body. The slippery fluid dripped from his buttocks down his thighs.

"Mm—"

Reacting even to this modest stimulation, Toya felt miserable and twisted his body away. What kind of spell was Hodaka using? What had he done to him? He was so anxious, reacting so much to even the slightest touch. It terrified him.

Hodaka circled his hands around Toya's hips and, thanks to the soap's lubrication, pried him open easily. Soap trickled into a place that was usually never exposed, but Toya stopped caring soon enough.

The part of him that stood erect sought its own stimulation, quivering with desire. He was being prepared unceremoniously, but he was on edge. He

had put his arms around Hodaka's neck, he wasn't sure when, and was rubbing his groin against his clothes, wanting more. But Hodaka refused to grant him his usual direct caresses.

"Do you like...this?" As he spoke, the man shoved a finger inside him, pushing against the tightness.

"Ah—nngh!"

Hodaka's free hand pinched one of Toya's nipples. That part of his body never used to be sensitive, but when Hodaka scraped his nails over them, tears welled up in Toya's eyes at the impatience that rose inside him.

Hodaka's hand slid from his chest down to his belly, brushing his member, slicked already with its anticipation.

Toya panted. His foolish hopes for loving stimulation were dashed almost immediately. Hodaka grabbed Toya's organ in a firm grip. Pain shot through him, and Toya arched his body.

"Stop, please!"

"No." Hodaka's finger, buried inside Toya, assaulted him with even greater cruelty, bringing Toya to his mercy. Hodaka was boldly assaulting Toya's walls, giving him all the stimulation he could want. But Toya couldn't climax. Hodaka was holding his member too tightly.

"Please...let me—" Toya raved, without shame or concern for Hodaka's opinion of him. He wanted Hodaka to free him. He wanted Hodaka to let him orgasm.

"Say 'please let me come.' You're holding me so tight—as much a slut as ever."

"I—I won't," Toya refused, shaking his head again and again. He would never say that. He would bite his tongue off before Hodaka made him say something that would destroy the last shreds of his self-respect.

He saw his chance when Hodaka pulled his finger out of him, intending to punish Toya for his stubbornness. Toya weakly pushed Hodaka away and, once he'd succeeded in escaping the man's grasp, he crawled across the tiled floor to the terrace. But there was no lock and no other exit, and he was easily trapped there. He huddled in a ball.

"Oh, so you want to do it out here?" Hodaka knelt beside Toya, grabbing his wet hair roughly and yanking his head back to look up at him.

"I'm begging you. Please stop—"

Toya's weak cries across the rubble of his obliterated pride were useless in the face of their settled agreement. His back slammed painfully into the tile as Hodaka pushed him down. But overriding the pain was his body's agonizing thirst for some conclusive pleasure. That was harder to bear than any of it. Toya closed his eyes, trying to close himself off.

Hodaka tore his own shirt off and spread it under Toya's back. Toya gasped as the man's finger pushed its way once more inside him, pushing aside his puckered flesh. Toya had tasted the denial of this touch, so the pleasure was enough to drive him insane, but just as before, that hand held him in check. Toya couldn't climax; all he could do was yearn for it.

"Ah—ah! No—"

"Now say it."

Toya would never do anything but bear this treatment and resist. Hodaka knew that. He must have.

"I know you can say it. You can say anything; you have no shame. You're just not trying."

Toya shook his head, as if trying to escape the luscious torture that Hodaka caused him. But he was no match for the skillful strokes against his sensitive, eager flesh.

"You always love it when I do you here. You know you can't hold out."

"Stop...damn you—"

"There's no need for language like that."

Toya still didn't understand that the more he resisted, the more Hodaka enjoyed it. He struggled to defy the stimulation as best he could, but his resolve meant nothing in the face of Hodaka's skill. He broke Toya's mind easily. Someone like Toya, who knew the pleasure of the flesh, could not withstand him.

"Beautiful people should use beautiful words. But," the man continued, "your beauty can't hide your perversion. Obscene people like you are suited for nothing but obscene words. Say them." He thrust his fingers powerfully into Toya, emphasizing his command, and Toya's body convulsed. But still the stimulation he wanted didn't come. It was bitter. Painful. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Not a chance. That was what he had to say. He would never let something so humiliating pass his lips. He knew that if he said what Hodaka wanted, he would

be betraying the person he loved and all the things most important to him. If he embraced his lust, as he wanted to, it would be over.

But his body was shamefully honest.

"Ah—ah! Nngh!"

Hodaka moved his finger faster, and the wet sound of his flesh being penetrated rose from Toya's body. The noise humiliated him. But the more cruelly he was treated, the more his pleasure intensified, torturing Toya and intoxicating him. Finally, his voice gave way to sobs, mixing in with his panting.

"Please...let me—let me come," Toya pleaded, in tears.

Now that the walls around his rationality had collapsed, he could say it as many times as he needed to.

"Let me come," he begged, borne aloft on his passion.

"From now on, whenever you want to come, you need to ask me first."

Toya nodded again and again at the man's commanding voice. Drops of sweat flew from his hair, wetting Hodaka's beautiful cheek.

"If you understand, tell me."

"I—I understand..." He was breaking Toya, remolding him. His heart, his body, everything.

"Does that feel good?"

"Y—yes. So good," Toya repeated, in a trance. He knew he shouldn't have done this. But the more he thought of getting out of there, the thicker his mind became, until finally he lost the last trace of the idea.

"Wasn't that easy? I knew you could say it."

Toya tightened his arm around Hodaka's neck, rocking his hips in a trance. Panting sighs fell from Toya's wet lips one after another, but he wasn't even aware of them. His bonds released, the cleft in his body spread wide, his puckered flesh twitched obscenely and sucked hungrily on the man's finger.

"I'm—I'm coming—!"

His desire burst forth into Hodaka's hand.

He was vividly aware of the humiliating truth that he had been pushed to orgasm by the man's fingers alone. The last defenses still standing inside Toya were on the verge of collapse. His lust had caught hold of him and wouldn't let go. It was dragging him down like quicksand.

"What do you want me to do next?"

Toya was quiet.

"If you do exactly what I say, you'll get a reward after. Tell me what you want me to do next."

Toya's shoulders heaved with his frantic breathing. He shook his head.

I don't know what I want you to do to me.

All he knew was that he wanted more. More of the pleasure that only Hodaka could give him.

"Was it hard?" The man smiled and gently bit down on the soft skin of Toya's earlobe. "I'll take pity on you today."

Toya didn't care anymore. Anything would be all right with him. When he was with Hodaka, having sex like this, Toya was no better than a wild animal. Right now, he wanted a deep, violent pleasure, more than anything.

Chapter 7

I don't want to go to work.

Toya sighed unhappily, curled up in bed. *I don't want to see Hodaka ever again.*

But if he went about it the wrong way, he knew people would pry into his reasons. The easiest way to get out of seeing Hodaka again would be to quit his job.

He felt so pitiful.

The first time, circumstances had overpowered him, but all the times after that he had had the opportunity to refuse. But he had challenged Hodaka again and again, and each time he lost, he surrendered his body to him. It had happened so many times that he was ashamed to count them. It was almost as if he was going to see Hodaka just to have sex with him.

And anyway, he only got twenty pages of the manuscript every time he beat Hodaka. He would have to challenge the pro-level player dozens of times in order to get a full book.

"Damn it."

Memories he preferred to leave buried kept resurfacing, and Toya groaned in embarrassment. He had once had pride and self-respect as a man. He felt as if everything he'd spent his life building had been turned upside down.

He was finally able to acknowledge the truth of Yoshimi's words: Hodaka was morally bankrupt. He was a despicable excuse for a man. All he did was lie. He had lured Toya into doing things with his deceitful tricks. The stories he created were amazing, but Toya would never be able to forgive him.

But I'm with him at the bottom, because I was willing to use whatever disgusting means necessary to get a manuscript out of him.

His thoughts tangled into each other and he began to feel worse and worse. *I haven't used any of my paid leave yet, so I'm just going to take today off.*

Once he'd called the company to let them know he wasn't coming in, Toya burrowed back into bed.

When he was only reading Hodaka's books and essays, he had truly believed that Hodaka was a remote but noble person. But the real Kai Hodaka was a terrible human being, a completely impossible man. He was arrogant and didn't think of other people as human beings. He had treated Toya like a plaything.

Why had Hodaka been so interested in Toya when he had so much already?

Why did it have to be him?

Did he want to break Toya and remake him as a whole new person?

There were so many things Toya hadn't known before meeting Hodaka. For instance, the fact that his body had an organ that got so intoxicated by Hodaka's touch that Toya would cry. Or the fact that Toya's rationality may as well not have existed in the face of Hodaka's skills.

Lost in these absurd thoughts, Toya drifted into sleep. His body's defenses had been worn down, and he shook with a chill, the first sign of the cold he had caught. It would get better if he slept. He didn't have the energy to get up to take some medicine. Instead, he slipped into the depths of slumber without it.

Some time later, he thought he heard the phone ringing endlessly, but he decided to ignore it.

As slumber was once again taking hold of him, the doorbell rang. He looked at the clock. It was past three in the afternoon. If it was a delivery or a bill collector, he could deal with it later. No one he knew would be coming to see him at this time of day. He decided to pretend that he wasn't there, but the bell continued ringing insistently. Toya stumbled out of bed and tottered groggily to the door in his pajamas.

"Who is it?" He opened the door and gasped in surprise. "Mister Hodaka?"

Hodaka was looking down at Toya, wearing a trench coat that complimented his great height and a supple smile. "They said you were under the weather."

"Yes, but—is everything all right? Can I help you with something?"

"I came to see you. Is that okay?"

At a time like this, it could have been either bad or good, but Toya didn't have the energy to entertain anyone right now. He wanted Hodaka to go home, but at that moment his fever caused him to stumble.

"Ah!"

Inevitably, he fell against Hodaka's chest. Toya pulled his body away quickly. Hodaka's body heat was

associated with sex in Toya's mind. It was something that caused Toya both pleasure and pain, shame and regret.

"Even I wouldn't do anything to you in the state you're in. Relax." The man whispered in his ear, "You should be in bed."

"You're the one who woke me up, you know." Toya's illness soured his mood, driving him to say such angry things. But Hodaka looked at Toya as if he found it amusing.

"You're so cute when you're angry."

"Please don't say things like that. I'm not angry, I've got a fever."

"Even that was cute. I wish you would do that all the time."

"When you talk to me like that and upset me without giving me a manuscript, it puts me in a difficult position."

Through the haze that clouded his mind, Toya felt stupid for mouthing off while being held in the arms of the man he hated.

"You—" Toya muttered as Hodaka entered his apartment, supporting him. His bed was still warm. He should have been able to relax there. "If I didn't have to work with you, and if you hadn't written those incredible stories, I would never want to talk to you again." He would never have said these things under normal circumstances.

"That's too bad." Hodaka shrugged and stared down at Toya.

"Why—" Why did he have to treat him like

that? How had he managed to change Toya? He didn't understand it. He was lost. He was scared. Whenever he was with Hodaka, he stopped being himself. But still...

"Go to sleep. What you need now is rest," Hodaka murmured soothingly, as if he were speaking to a child. He combed his fingers gently through Toya's hair and, drowning in the rhythm, Toya closed his eyes.

He couldn't let himself be tricked. He was sure that this, too, was a trap.

This man manipulated Toya with his lips, with his fingers, treating him as nothing more than a tool. He played with Toya as if he were a magnificent doll with a body of flesh and a soul. He couldn't drop his guard against someone like that, because would be the only one to suffer for it if he failed. And Hodaka hadn't opened himself to Toya at all. He hadn't let him get close, he hadn't become friendlier, nothing.

And yet, now that Toya was sick and timid, he had come. That was unfair. Showing him affection at a time like this made it so easy for Toya's stubborn heart to soften.

Even though Hodaka had never let Toya inside, he sometimes tried to placate him with kindness. It was the epitome of the carrot-and-stick treatment. Toya started to feel sorry for himself and how naïve he was.

Why was Hodaka being nice to him? He probably wanted to get in on Toya's good side.

What was Toya looking for in this man?

Toya sat up groggily. He'd had a bizarre dream about Hodaka coming to his apartment.

Despite everything that had happened, he knew he still cherished an idealized image of Hodaka. He was imposing his own views on the man, but they had no basis in reality.

Because of his fever, he'd sweated in his sleep and now his entire body was damp and uncomfortable.

"You're awake."

Toya thought his heart was going to stop from the shock of the sudden voice. It was none other than Hodaka, standing in the doorway.

"I—I had a dream—"

"I'm flattered to hear that you dream about me."

Toya froze, not knowing how to cope with Hodaka's behavior, which was exactly as it had always been. If Toya told Hodaka how often he dreamt about him, what would his reaction be? It must have been his fever that made him even consider doing something so stupid.

"Can you eat something? I can bring it in here if you can't get out of bed. Or do you want me to carry you to the table?"

"Please stop saying things like that!" Toya shouted in embarrassment. The shouting made him light-headed and he swooned, catching himself against a wall.

"You shouldn't be so energetic when you're in such bad shape."

"You made me..." Half exhausted, that was all

Toya could say. He raised his eyes. "What are you doing here, anyway, sir?"

"I went out to do some research while I was visiting someone. There was something I needed your help with, so I called the editing department and they said you were out sick. So I came to see how you were doing." Hodaka had taken Toya home in a taxi before, so it probably hadn't been too hard to find his apartment.

"What were you researching?"

"Are you going to play dumb, after you deliberately asked me for a manuscript?" He didn't seem angry. That much was clear from his tone and his effortless smile.

Then Toya gasped. "You—you're writing the manuscript?"

"I said that I would." He wore an unusually tender expression as he stared down at Toya. "Although of course twenty pages won't make much of a book. You're going to have to win a couple more times."

"In that case, I'll keep practicing until I can win."

Hodaka gave a faint smile at the enthusiasm on Toya's face. "You've got spirit, but first you should practice being healthy. If you get sick every time we compete, you're never going to be able to beat me."

This time, Toya swallowed his accusations and didn't bother to ask whose fault it was that he was so sick. Hodaka had done it all. It was his fault. He'd messed Toya up. Not just his health, but his spirit, too.

"Anyway, you should eat something. If you don't hurry, the porridge will turn to glue."

Hodaka told Toya to stay where he was, and returned soon after carrying a tray with an unfamiliar soup bowl on it. Toya's eyes bugged out. He didn't think he'd had any dishes or ingredients for porridge in his apartment. But since Hodaka was waiting for him, he brought the porridge to his mouth.

"This is great. Did you make this, sir?"

"Of course not. I can't cook. I had it delivered from a Chinese restaurant I go to. If you like it, I'll take you there sometime."

Toya didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. Hodaka didn't seem to notice. Once Toya had finished eating in silence, Hodaka picked the tray up from Toya's lap and smiled. "I won't have any fun if you don't get better. Even seeing you like this, I'm taken with you."

At best, Toya thought derisively, he was a toy Hodaka could use to distract himself.

"Will you give me a taste to thank me for the food?" he asked, taking hold of Toya's chin, tracing a fine line.

"But I'm—"

Hodaka knew better than to pursue Toya's interrupted words.

When their lips touched, Toya realized in a corner of his clouded mind that this was their first kiss. There was something strangely familiar about the feeling of Hodaka's lips against his, though it was the first time he'd touched them. He couldn't hold back any longer. He stretched his arms out, wrapping them around Hodaka's neck. The tray fell to the floor with a thud. As the kiss went on, Toya's concern that he would give



Hodaka his cold blew away like smoke on the breeze.

"What's wrong?"

"Kiss me."

He wanted more.

He wanted Hodaka to kiss him. He wanted it more than he could say.

It had to be his fever. His body was being eaten away by a rampant disease, and it was affecting him more deeply than he'd thought. He was tangling his tongue with another man's, drawing the kisses out defiantly.

"We'll just kiss today. Is that okay?"

Part of him was astounded that they would have done anything more, but there was another part of him that was disappointed; that stunned Toya. He felt like Hodaka would invade his entire body, beginning with his lips. He was growing numb from the fever Hodaka had given him.

"Mister Hodaka." Toya looked up at Hodaka with damp eyes, rubbing his lower body against the man's body, begging him. He couldn't tell if it was another effect of his fever or pure lust.

"You're not allowed to seduce me. I'm still just worried about your health."

I didn't mean to do it...

As the kisses became more impassioned, the bed began to creak.

He wanted to have sex with Hodaka. He wanted to be taken by him. There was a part of him that wanted it so badly, it was almost crazed. Toya was shocked by the realization.

Toya found an empty seat on the subway and fell into it. He opened the book he'd brought, but he was distracted and didn't make any progress.

He'd wound up only missing one day of work, though probably not because of Hodaka's nursing. Hodaka had even brought him fruit when he came to visit. He'd found it in the kitchen after he'd left. He'd sent a polite letter of thanks soon after, but there'd been no reply.

It was November. Thinking about the deadline that Makihara had laid down depressed him. He really needed to get in touch with Hodaka soon, but he wanted some more time to think first. There had been something wrong with Toya ever since he'd met him the man. Something had gotten messed up.

Hodaka had a despicable personality, but he had created wonderful stories. Toya had to continue the competition with him in order to get something new.

Even though he'd been the one to suggest the wager, their relationship had become completely irrational. But even as he was forced into this twisted relationship, Toya couldn't manage to hate Hodaka. It wasn't just because Toya had suggested the bet in the first place, or because he was dealing with the celebrated author Kai Hodaka. It was because Toya was beginning to be drawn in by his indescribable nature.

He was a difficult person to understand. He wasn't simply malicious: Toya knew that there were good things about him, too. Giving the matter a great deal of thought, Toya felt that the visit Hodaka had paid when he was sick was ample proof of the kind of

concern typical of him.

"No way—" Toya hastily interrupted his own thoughts, realizing that he was on the verge of being won over. Hodaka's kindness wasn't actually that. Would a kind person use another human being like a toy? Hodaka was bringing Toya under his sway for fun. Toya knew it was foolish to be influenced by that, but he had gradually begun to feel more enthusiastic.

It had been four days since they'd seen each other. No, the fourth day wasn't over yet. Nearly ten days had passed since they'd last felt each other's bodies.

Maybe because he hadn't been touched by Hodaka in so long, Toya was thinking about him every day. It was normal not to see him, but it frustrated him not to be able to. He was still afraid of seeing Hodaka again, and because he was afraid, he couldn't see him.

What Toya wanted was the manuscript. If he had that, he wouldn't need Hodaka anymore. Toya tried to tell himself that.

If only Hodaka would call him—but there was no reason for him to. The visit when he was sick had been an exception. Hodaka had already passed the responsibility to Toya, and that gave Toya all the more reason to feel ashamed of his desire.

The longer he went without seeing Hodaka, the more he felt a void growing in his heart. He didn't know what it was, and he was afraid of not knowing, but finding out was even more frightening.

He couldn't even recognize his own inability to face these conflicting emotions.

"Hey, Toya, what do you think of these?"

Soothing classical music filled the store as Miwa peered excitedly into a display case. Toya didn't mind that she'd pestered him to buy her earrings for her birthday, but he hadn't had time to buy them himself, so they'd decided to let her choose her own and used it as an excuse to get together for a date. He felt a little guilty for not going to the effort personally, but it was better than not doing anything at all.

"They look fine."

He wanted to dispel the guilt he felt for ignoring Miwa lately by buying her things. All Toya thought about anymore was Hodaka. When he was alone at night, an unspeakable lust filled him. Miwa couldn't have known. How could her boyfriend, who she thought was practically asexual, be suffering from such perpetual desire? But Toya was afraid of seeing Hodaka face to face, and so they still hadn't seen each other.

"Come on, help me choose! You haven't been calling me lately, either, and I miss you!"

Toya was gazing into the case, but since he hadn't said anything, she had gotten fed up.

"I just thought you were really busy too." Toya took one look at Miwa's silent reaction and quickly shook his head. "I'm sorry. Work's been tough lately and I've been really stressed out." Toya forced a smile for Miwa and peered into the display case for her. Toya thought all the earrings looked fine, but he supposed that wouldn't be good enough for Miwa.

"No, I'm sorry," she said finally, giving in. He felt terrible about being so unkind to Miwa. She was just

trying not to bother him.

"It's okay. It was my fault."

"But Toya, you've really been acting strange lately. You're so distracted when we're together—it seems like your mind is somewhere else. You're not...cheating on me, are you?"

Seeing this as his only route to salvation, Toya gave a placid smile, though her words terrified him. He pushed back the riot in his mind and shook his head. "I would never cheat on you."

What he was doing wasn't cheating. He was haunted by his guilty conscience, but it was nothing more than a normal business relationship. A caricature of sex, using his body. There was no way being insulted and looked down on like that could be seen as acts of love.

Toya flatly denied Miwa's suspicion, but her shoulders were shaking. They were the slender, pliant shoulders of a woman, completely unlike Hodaka's. Her body, which used to fill Toya with wonder every time he touched, it was now a mere object that held no meaning for him. He wanted something different now.

It was no longer Miwa that he wanted to touch. It was that man with the skin like velvet. Hodaka—whenever he thought about him, a sharp pain pierced his heart.

"Toya? Are you okay?"

"I was just looking at those earrings. Do you like them?" He returned to their trivial conversation, hoping that he would be able to lose himself in it. But despite Toya's best efforts, fierce emotions were rising in him.

I miss him.

He missed him. He missed Hodaka. He wanted to see his face. He wanted to touch his skin. He hadn't seen him for more than ten days.

There was definitely something wrong with him if he missed him this much after such a short time.

No—he was just worried about whether or not Hodaka was actually working on the manuscript. He had to make sure of that.

He knew how pathetic this struggle to justify his feelings was.

"Yeah, I like them. Let's get these." She'd chosen a pair of small diamond studs that looked clean and simple. He bet she was being typically considerate by trying to stay inside his budget.

The food at the restaurant was good, too, but the conversation was never lively.

"So this struggle with Hodaka is just dragging out?" Miwa ventured as she picked at the Mont Blanc she'd gotten for dessert. Toya wasn't very hungry, so he'd ordered only a lemon sorbet and had finally managed to polish it off.

"Yeah, uh—it looks like it." Toya's guilt at talking about Hodaka kept him from saying very much. Miwa seemed to have interpreted that as a sign that it was hard for him to work with Hodaka, but Toya was restless. He'd gotten bored with the food, and he tried hard to cover his discomfort with a neutral expression.

"You really like Kai Hodaka, don't you, Toya?"

"It's just work."

"But you do still like him, right? You're

neglecting me for him. He's all you ever think about. I'm getting jealous!" she finished teasingly, and Toya gave her a grim smile.

He didn't like Hodaka. Every time Hodaka touched him, he couldn't decide where he fell on the love-hate scale. He didn't expect to ever be able to deal with Hodaka with mutual affection. At this point, it was odder that he should have any positive feelings left for him at all.

"You're free today, right? Can I stay at your place tonight?" Miwa asked casually after they'd left the restaurant.

"No, I—I have to get back to the office. There's still some stuff left to do." He made the excuse without thinking. He didn't want Miwa to touch him tonight.

"Really?"

"Yeah, there's a book I have to finish for today. I'm sorry...it's your birthday and everything." Toya gave a thin smile, then pulled Miwa to his chest and stroked her hair.

He didn't know why, but he couldn't kiss her.

"Are you sure you're not cheating on me?"

"What?"

"I mean, before you didn't want much, but now—you don't want anything. Do you even remember the last time I slept over?" It must have been hard for her to say that. Toya was struck by guilt. "I feel like you aren't attracted to me anymore. Do you really want to marry me, Toya? Who are you thinking about right now?"

"Don't worry so much, Miwa. It's fine." Miwa

didn't look completely convinced, and when Toya saw her off at the train station, waving to her, she turned back again and again to look at him reluctantly.

But he couldn't go after her.

I'm thinking about Hodaka.

He couldn't tell Miwa, but Hodaka was all Toya could think about now. He wanted to see him and he wanted to sleep with him more than anything. The inside of his mouth was dry, and he wiped away the sweat gathering on his forehead. He knew the way home from here, but he couldn't move. He just stood in the milling crowd of people.

Maybe I should go see him.

No, that was unrealistic. It was a completely stupid idea.

But his body began moving on its own, ignoring the warnings of his mind. He turned around and went out of the station, hailing a taxi that passed in front of him. He gave the directions to the apartment in Hamarikyu, such a familiar sight to him now, and collapsed back into the seat.

Where were these irrational and childish ideas coming from?

Still driven by wild emotions, Toya entered the building of Hodaka's apartment and pressed the button beside his name on the intercom.

Hodaka sent his maid home at night, so it was Hodaka's voice that Toya heard. "Oh, it's you. Come up." There must have been a camera somewhere. His voice was unsurprised.

Toya headed to the apartment on the fortieth

floor and waited for Hodaka in the hall.

“What are you doing here so late?”

The cruelty tingeing his voice finally brought Toya back to his senses. *What was I thinking? I never should have done something like this.*

“I’m sorry. It’s just that lately—uh, I wanted to thank you. For the visit.”

“You’ve already thanked me for that. How many kisses did you give me again?” The man glanced at Toya. He felt shy under the strength of that clear gaze.

“That’s—that’s true. Please excuse me. I’ll go home now.”

“Hold on. You had some reason for coming, didn’t you?”

Toya said nothing.

“Well if not, could you help me with something? I was just about to look for something, but it’s too much to do alone.” Seeing Toya staring at him so unguardedly, Hodaka gave a voiceless laugh. “It’s for your company’s project. When I started doing the research, I hit a snag.”

“Are you really writing it?”

“You don’t trust me at all, do you? It’s my policy to never break a promise once it’s made. If I did, people would lose faith in me.”

So then Toya had no reason to refuse him. He had been worrying about the manuscript’s progress, and this was the perfect opportunity to feel him out about it. “Excuse my rudeness, sir. I’d be more than happy to help you.”

As he stepped into Hodaka’s apartment, the strong scent of lilies came to him. He had been there any

number of times, but this was the first time he’d ever smelled flowers.

The library was on the second floor. There were no lights turned on in the room; it was illuminated only by the streaming moonlight. Hodaka groped for the switch, and the room instantly brightened.

The room had been designed to be functional. All of the walls were bookcases, packed with books. A large desk sat beside the window. But as soon as Toya entered the room, what he saw immobilized him.

Spreading out before him was a setting perfectly suited to recounting stories of brutality.

The floor was clear of clutter, but a chaotic mountain of papers and other odds and ends towered impossibly high on the desk. Hodaka must have used his laptop to do most of his work; it had been set on the edge of the large desk.

A tiny space had been cleared for the lilies.

“Those are lovely flowers.”

“Thanks. Today is the anniversary of my parents’ death. They were my mom’s favorite flower.”

“Your parents are—?”

“Yeah. It’s been twenty years now.”

He must have lost his parents when he was in high school.

“I’m so sorry to have come by at such a personal time.” Toya suddenly felt embarrassed. Hodaka was trying to grieve in private, and Toya had come along, driven here by his carnal passions to disturb him.

“The living shouldn’t trouble themselves about the dead. You never knew them. Don’t give it a second

thought.” His words were philosophically detached, but Toya thought he could detect a resignation beneath them that eluded description.

“Have you lived alone since then?”

“You could say that. But if I ever need anything, the maid comes by to help.”

But there was nothing between her and Hodaka but money and a contractual agreement. As Toya looked into Hodaka’s face, filled with shadows by the faint light of the room, he had a sudden realization.

This man is lonely.

Out of all the people Toya knew, Hodaka might have been the most desolate of all.

The more talented a person is, the more unhappy they tend to be. If Hodaka hadn’t been an author and hadn’t created such wonderful stories, Toya wouldn’t have gone anywhere near him, either.

Hodaka’s descriptions of characters in his stories could be harsh and detached. The humanity of the author and that of the writing may have been separate, but there were people that didn’t believe that. If they found out that Hodaka actually believed those things, or if they thought that Hodaka could really see through people, people would surely distance themselves from him.

“What’s wrong? You’ve got a strange look on your face.”

“Uh, sorry.”

“That’s so like you. You were imagining what it must have been like for me growing up starved for affection, weren’t you?”

Heat flooded Toya’s cheeks at Hodaka’s insight.

It was as if he had seen straight into his heart, seen everything he was thinking.

“Were you making yourself sad for my sake? You’re a kind man, Toya.” A smile twisted Hodaka’s mouth but got no further as he touched Toya’s cheek.

Hodaka was wrong. Toya wasn’t kind. Toya had to work hard to be nice to people, and that kind of person was intrinsically not kind. The fact that he had abandoned Miwa in order to come here was all the proof anyone could need. He’d put his own desires ahead of her. How awful he must seem in the eyes of others.

“Don’t look like that. If you feel bad, then give me a hand here.”

“What exactly is it that you want me to do?”

Hodaka directed him to an empty chair, and Toya sat down.

“Filing. I thought about asking my nephew to do it, but he wasn’t available. I’m glad you came when you did.”

The clippings, copies of documents, and piles of paper lay thick on the desk, blanketing its surface. Hodaka wanted him to organize it all in an indexed file. Toya shuffled through the papers and discovered that more than half were cheap entertainment and soft pornography papers from the early sixties. “Can I clean the desk off before I start filing?”

“Oh, I don’t care. I’m terrible at cleaning and organization. That’s why I try not to let too many things accumulate.”

“That’s probably a good idea.” It was a tragic sight, what Hodaka called his lack of organization. Toya

could understand why he needed a maid.

He was still curious how much of the manuscript was written so far. He thought of asking, but Hodaka seemed absorbed in searching for something.

After roughly organizing the documents, Toya sat down across from Hodaka to begin. During pauses in his filing, Toya looked up at Hodaka, who was absorbed in reading. The man's serene bearing was beautiful. It seemed like even the slightest of noises would destroy the peaceful scene, and Toya didn't want to do so much as breathe.

Just then, Toya's sleeve caught some papers on top of the desk and several sheets fell towards Hodaka. He was absorbed in reading his book and didn't seem to notice. Toya stood up and walked to Hodaka's side, bending over to pick up the papers.

As he stood beside Hodaka, Toya's gaze drifted to him unintentionally. He was hypnotized by the sharp line that ran from the nape of the man's neck to his chin.

"Is something wrong?"

Hodaka finally noticed his gaze. Toya tripped over his tongue at the sudden question. "No, no."

"That reminds me of something I forgot to ask you." A cruel smile came over Hodaka's face. "Why did you come here, anyway?"

Toya had hoped this question wouldn't be phrased quite so directly. His mind went blank.

"If it was a reminder about the manuscript, you would have made an appointment first."

That was true. This battle had been lost ever since he'd stopped restricting his relationship with

Hodaka to business. Toya slowly looked away from Hodaka, his head drooping. "I...missed you."

"The man who did such awful things to you? Why?" The last word was sweetly hoarse, hemmed in by a sigh. It came like a practiced rustle in the skirts of his elegance.

"I don't know," Toya murmured, almost as if to himself.

"You don't know?"

Hodaka pulled suddenly on Toya's arm and drew him against his chest. He dragged Toya's neck down and captured his lips in a rough kiss.

That was their second kiss.

Hodaka traced the roof of Toya's mouth with his tongue, and Toya shuddered. His body went limp.

"You know why you came."

"Mm."

Hodaka pulled off Toya's necktie and dropped it to the floor, then put his fingers to the buttons of Toya's shirt. He slipped the buttons open deftly and dragged his lips and tongue down Toya's body. "You know."

Yes, I know. I was ready for it. I couldn't stay away.

It was hard for Toya to admit the truth of this to himself. He didn't want to admit that such a twisted desire was lurking within him.

Everything he'd done up till now had been for his work. He could still believe that. But from now on, if he chose to drown his will in his desire, he would be guilty of the deepest betrayal.

He wasn't himself tonight. He tried on that

excuse to see how it fit.

Now that he had come to accept Hodaka after such bitterness, it was hard to be away from him for so long. He wasn't a bad person. Hodaka had seduced him.

"Did you have a date today?"

"What—?"

"There's some lipstick on you." Hodaka chuckled and pointed at the cuff of Toya's sleeve. He must have stained it when he'd held Miwa earlier.

He hesitated. "Yes. I did."

"Then shouldn't you be with her? You could have come see me tomorrow."

"But I—I missed you today." Toya strained to speak, his voice a whisper. He knew how important Miwa's birthday was to her. But he had acted so cruelly and, finally, betrayed her. Knowing it all, Toya wrapped his arms around Hodaka's neck, clinging to him. "I wanted to see you so badly. You—you did this to me!"

His emotions, his words burst forth, as if a dam had broken inside him. Toya didn't know how to stop it. All he could do was tighten his embrace around the man's neck.

"You're so impassioned." A slight smile crossed Hodaka's face as his lips grazed Toya's.

No one had ever used the word impassioned to describe Toya before. But maybe it was correct to call this behavior impassioned. He had so much desire for this man that he was overwhelmed by insane urges, by his emotions.

"You didn't come here just to say hello, did



you? Tell me why you came.”

He felt it every time. It was always the same. Hodaka's beautiful voice seduced him.

“Tell me, Toya.”

“I want—” His voice wavered and cut off the rest of his words. But the man was going to force him to say it all.

“I didn't catch that.”

He must have known. How would he destroy Toya's reason? How would he make everything inside Toya his own?

Toya closed his eyes, speaking in a tense whisper. “I want to have sex with you.”

“Look at me when you say that.” Hodaka roughly grabbed his hair and forced him to look at him.

“I want to have sex with you.”

The third time he said it, desperation was beginning to creep into his voice.

The man looked into Toya's eyes, stained with an indelible agony, and laughed loudly. “All right.”

There was no love in this: it was sex purely for lust and pleasure. There was nothing to redeem the sin of it in Toya's mind. But still he was drowning in it. He was paralyzed by it.

Everything from this point forward would belong to the realm of deceit and perversion. Once Toya set foot inside that forbidden country, he would become Hodaka's willing accomplice. He wouldn't be able to justify himself anymore.

He could still turn back. He didn't have to

give up the part of him that wanted to have sex with only people that he loved. He didn't have to betray his girlfriend, who still believed in him.

He knew that, but those things were no longer important to him.

He wanted Hodaka. He had only one desire, and that was it.

“I'll have sex with you, just like you want me to,” the man whispered, sliding his hand over the line of Toya's jaw. “You know what to do, right?”

Toya knew even without being told that he had to make the man ready.

He managed to pull down the zipper of Hodaka's pants with his impatient fingers. That was the only easy part. Confronted by the man's penis, Toya hesitated. He couldn't even look at it. He lowered his eyes in embarrassment.

Hodaka didn't taunt him or get upset. He smiled in amusement and tenderly stroked Toya's hair. He pressed his index and middle fingers against Toya's lips, dragging his upper lip to one side. Hodaka's fingers brushed the soft gums behind his lips, causing a slight shudder to run through Toya's body.

“You look so hungry for more and all I did was touch your lips. I can't wait to see how eagerly you're going to go down on me.”

Toya flushed all the way to his ears, his gaze lowered.

“Toya.” Hodaka's voice came down from overhead, rich with invitation, as his fingers trailed over Toya's ear.

Finally, Toya gathered his nerves and reached out with his tongue to timidly lick him. He was mortified just touching the tip of it with his tongue. But if he closed his eyes so he didn't see it right in front of him, he thought he could do it. He didn't know what he was doing at first, so he just carefully licked Hodaka's member from the root to the tip.

"That's a good boy. You're doing all right for your first time."

Toya was pleased by Hodaka's praise. Burying his face between the man's legs, he tried his best to overcome his embarrassment and give Hodaka what he wanted.

As a man, there was nothing more degrading than this. Toya was embarrassed by the part of him that was so pitifully happy at being praised, but it allowed him to lose himself in what he was doing.

"Mm—nngh."

Toya realized eventually that Hodaka had gotten tired of just being licked, so he tried slowly taking him into his mouth. When he'd taken him as far as he could, he pulled his head back, dragging his lips over it, and Hodaka hardened as he watched.

Toya wasn't used to this. He found it so difficult that tears came to his eyes and his jaw started to hurt. He glanced up furtively, wondering if he would be able to stop soon, and saw a slight flush in Hodaka's taught cheeks. The expression was so unexpectedly sexual that Toya's heart squeezed tight in his chest. He had never suspected that he had the power to make Hodaka look like that...

He could please this man, who he'd always believed was so refined.

At this thought, a feeling like tenderness bubbled up in him, and Toya became even more absorbed in the work of his lips.

"How do you know so much about going down on a man if no one's ever taught you?" Hodaka's voice was husky, roughened by his languor, as he insulted Toya. It surpassed the limits of obscenity, but since Toya had Hodaka in his mouth, he couldn't even respond.

Hodaka was stroking Toya's hair and face tenderly, betraying the cruelty of his words. Entranced by the gentle sensation, Toya continued his careful attentions.

"You came here begging me to sleep with you. You must have wanted it pretty badly." Toya wished Hodaka wouldn't say such horrible things. It always excited him so much more quickly.

What he was doing was forbidden. He knew it was. It was his guilty conscience that made his pleasure so much more intense.

His hands and mouth were getting sticky from the moisture of his mouth and the man's anticipation. Toya knew how disgraceful and immoral he must have looked, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Nngh!"

Suddenly Hodaka dragged his toe nails over the cloth covering Toya's crotch. Surprised, Toya pulled away from the man's belly and cried out without thinking.

"Are you hard?"

Just as Hodaka had said, Toya was already more excited than he could believe. His body was already dripping, reacting in full.

"You got hard just from going down on me?"

His taunts pinned Toya down, immobile with humiliation, and he bit his lip.

"Answer me. Why are you so excited?" Hodaka dragged his toes once more across Toya's crotch, and Toya had to struggle to repress a moan.

He slowly swept his leg out, pushing Toya's legs apart. Toya thought he could hear the ready wetness of his body.

"Because I thought about—" Toya whispered in a husky voice, wet with a desire he couldn't fight. He was reluctant to say more. His body ached unbearably. He was ready, like a fruit hanging ripe on the branch, nectar dripping from him, yearning for Hodaka's touch.

"Say it all."

"I got so hard...because I thought about you taking me."

Hodaka watched him and laughed in a low voice. He traced his fingers over his face, brushing Toya's hair aside tenderly. "Now a reward for being honest. Take those off and sit down."

Toya obediently removed his clothing, leaving only a shirt, and sat down on his lap, facing Hodaka. Hodaka widened his legs slightly, making an opening, and pushed his fingers towards Toya's puckered flesh.

"No—" Toya shook his head. "Not this," he begged as he kissed Hodaka's forehead. He didn't want his fingers. What he wanted thrusting deep into his body,

hollowing him out with supple intensity, was Hodaka's organ, the essential piece of his body. Nothing else.

"Be patient. Maybe you're used to it now, but if you got hurt, that wouldn't be any fun."

Hodaka pulled Toya's clothes down around him, then pushed his finger inside his body. His hot, wet flesh welcomed even Hodaka's dry finger. But it wasn't enough, and Toya twitched, squirming over it, as if wanting more.

"You're so excited. Did you suck off some other guy before you came here?"

"Of—course I didn't—" Toya's self-control was strong, but against the torture of his words, it was weakened even without Hodaka saying such thing. He felt only shame at Hodaka's attacks, not rebellion. He couldn't do anything to stop them.

"That reminds me. You were so good with your mouth—I could believe that you seduced a man without even realizing it yourself."

Toya shook his head at these despicable words, trying to deny them. It was too cruel to insult him for doing a good job.

"You can't deny it forever, no matter how innocent you act. Just admit that you're a whore for men."

Toya sobbed, the leather chair creaking beneath them as he moved. Hodaka's finger rubbing between his folded flesh, stimulating him—it wasn't enough. He wanted something harder, something with more passion to penetrate him soon, to hollow out the flesh deep inside him.

"I can prove it. You want my body more than you want my manuscript."

"Ah—ah! Aangh!"

Hodaka's fingers dug into him, exploring, discovering everything, and Toya screamed as he came. The semen shot out of him and fell on Hodaka's designer shirt, but he didn't have the energy to care about it.

"That's how badly you want it, huh?"

"I want—it—please," Toya begged unevenly. The intensity of his pleasure had already made it impossible to speak clearly. Toya's eyes were wet with ecstasy, his cheeks pink as he pleaded again and again.

"In that case, why don't you try putting it in yourself? I'm sure you can."

Toya obediently raised his body slightly and pulled the small budding entrance to his body open with both hands, then tried to force Hodaka inside him.

"Nngh!"

The sensation as it gradually worked its way inside him was overwhelming, and all Toya could do was gasp.

Hodaka was violating him.

Not only had Hodaka taken everything from him, including his pride and self-respect, he had taught Toya how to give pleasure to a man and to take him in by himself.

His body belonged to Hodaka. It was an obscene work of flesh, designed by this man.

"Nngh—aah!"

As he rocked his hips, Toya finally succeeded in taking Hodaka all the way in. He took several deep

breaths. He had a strangely heavy feeling in his belly, but that was the price he paid to satisfy his degeneracy.

"Tell me how you want it."

Toya stretched out his thin arms and buried his face in the man's neck. He only gave off the faintest smell of sweat, but its elusiveness intoxicated Toya all the more.

"I want you—to make it hard—" Toya repeated the words he had been forced to learn earlier, and Hodaka nodded, looking extremely satisfied.

"All right. I'll make it harder than you've ever had before."

"Thank you," Toya gasped.

Hodaka began to slowly move his body, thrusting deeper inside Toya. It felt only like normal rubbing, but when Toya thought about how ruthless it was, it overwhelmed him. Sweat soaked his shirt and it clung to his body, but the sensation was not unpleasant.

"It's—it's so good—so...good..."

"Is it really that good? How about this?"

"Yes! There—go deeper—"

"If I did that, you'd be too tight. I wouldn't be able to move. I know it's good, but try loosening up a little."

"I—I can't—" Toya sobbed as he rode Hodaka, not caring about anything else in the world as he made the chair squeak noisily. Worried that the chair might break apart in the middle of their fun, Hodaka smiled cruelly as he tried to pull out of Toya.

"Don't go—!" Toya clung to Hodaka's neck, whimpering. But Hodaka was a monster.

"How could you?"

When Hodaka tore himself out, Toya was overcome by desolation. He'd wanted him to push in deeper and deeper, but instead he'd pulled out halfway through.

"Don't worry. Just lie on the desk and stick your butt in the air."

Toya staggered to his feet. Hodaka spoke again to encourage him. "Yes, like that. You look good like that."

Toya obediently threw his upper body down on the large desk and offered his hips to Hodaka. Hodaka shoved the sweat-dampened shirt out of the way and pushed himself inside Toya.

He's coming into me—

"Ah—nngh...ah!" Sounds of ecstasy slipped from Toya's mouth as his body was slowly spread open.

It was all just too good. This was the first time he'd ever been this excited. Every part of his body was anxiously sensitive, and even the slightest of stimulation from the shower of touches Hodaka gave him sent Toya into ecstasy.

"Deeper!"

"How do you want me to go deeper?"

"Stop...teas—"

He thought he would forget everything except demanding more pleasure. He was getting impatient with Hodaka, who refused to move the way he wanted him to. Toya started pumping his hips in order to take the deeper pleasure he wanted for himself.

Saliva pooled under him on the desk. He moved

his hands, groping for something to hold onto. His hand fell on a pile of papers he'd sorted earlier and sent them crashing to the floor.

"What a waste. You just cleaned that."

As he spoke, the man took merciless hold of Toya's member, and a scream escaped Toya's perfectly shaped lips.

"No! Mm—"

"You need to be punished," Hodaka whispered as he penetrated further and further into Toya.

Toya let out a small cry. He shook his head again and again, his cheek rubbing over the desk, growing hot with the friction.

"You deserve to be punished. You know why, don't you?"

Toya felt like he was going crazy as Hodaka rubbed the enticing wetness of his inner flesh.

Having this obscene nature and sexual body was wrong. Toya was wrong. All of it was wrong. But he couldn't say it. Toya could never surrender that last barrier inside himself.

He knew why he deserved it, but he couldn't admit it. He was afraid to. All of this was Hodaka's fault. If he admitted that it was his own fault, he didn't know what would happen.

"You know you're going to be punished, so why do you let me do these things to you? Tell me."

"I don't kn—nngh—"

It was wrong that Toya couldn't stop himself from reacting to the man's touch, to being taunted by him and tormented, but if he said that, it would break him. He

would lose everything that made him who he was.

So he wanted Hodaka to keep attacking him for now. He wanted Hodaka to slander him. Toya's sinful body and his heart, incapable of recognizing the extent of his sins, deserved no better.

"Such a bad boy."

Suddenly, Hodaka loosened his fingers around him and, at the same moment, thrust into Toya with a cruel strength.

The pleasure was so intense that Toya couldn't even make a noise. Toya arched his back as his body released a thick fluid that collected under his belly.

"Ungh!"

He groaned quietly and finally Toya felt the man's fluid filling him. Hodaka's fingers, spread out on the desk, were tense. When Toya saw that, an indescribable emotion came to vibrant life inside him.

The cloying scent of lilies and the musty smell of sweat pervaded the room. As their bodies slowly began to relax, Hodaka put his hand on Toya's. If being taken like this meant being dominated by another person, then Toya belonged entirely to Hodaka. Hodaka was the only one who could take control of Toya's entire body.

But why did he feel so uneasy? Why did he feel so alone?

They lay together, skin against skin, their heat rising, seeking completeness. But they should have achieved that.

Fresh tears were gathering in Toya's eyes, but not from pleasure or from pain. It was as if a chasm had yawned open in his heart. He needed Hodaka to be even



crueler to him, until he could forget that emptiness.

There was nothing but sex between the two of them, and Toya would no longer be satisfied with only that.

Their bodies still connected, Toya twisted around to look up at Hodaka's listless expression.

He already knew what he was going to say.

"Mm."

Toya stretched out a hand as he stirred, searching for Hodaka's warmth, as always. But on this particular day, the bed was unusually spacious and there was no sign of him.

"Sir?"

He sat up groggily. There was a dull throbbing in his hips.

The fluid on his legs had been wiped away, which meant that Hodaka had cleaned him up. Toya didn't even remember being moved to the bed. He probably should have woken up earlier to help clean up the library. He was sure they had left it a complete mess.

There was a light robe laid out on a chair near the bed. Toya wrapped it around himself and walked out of the room in his bare feet. He thought he heard sounds coming from the dining room downstairs.

He was surprised to see Hodaka standing in the kitchen. He had already gotten dressed and taken some lettuce out of the fridge. He was now clumsily trying to tear it up.

"Sir?" he called out hesitantly. Hodaka turned around to look at him.

"Oh, good morning."

"What are you doing? Would you like me to help you?"

"I was just getting breakfast ready. You don't have to help. Don't you have to go home before you can go back to the office?"

"Today is Saturday."

Hodaka met Toya's hesitant information with muttered surprise. It was funny, but Toya couldn't laugh at it. He was suddenly unsure what response would be safe. Hodaka drew up beside Toya and reached out to gently touch his cheek. "In that case, go take a shower. Take your time. When you're done, breakfast will be ready."

Toya took a quick shower and then went obediently into the dining room. A salad was already set out on the table. Or something loosely resembling a salad, anyway.

"Is this a salad?" Large chunks of torn up lettuce had been heaped on a plate. Toya couldn't help thinking that it looked less like a salad than an unapologetic pile of lettuce.

"I'd love to hear what you think it is, if it's not a salad," Hodaka replied sullenly. Toya was deeply surprised to get such a sulky response from Hodaka, who usually maintained an air of detachment.

"I suppose there are things that even you can't do." Of course, it made some sense, since the porridge Hodaka had brought when Toya was sick had been take-out.

"Well, aren't you grateful? I just don't believe in doing anything unnecessary."

"Then why not have the maid make the salad for you?"

"I gave her the day off."

"Why?"

"You don't mind if I try and cook for you, do you?"

"How many people have you ever made salad for?"

"What a thing to say. You're the first. I'm spoiling you." Hodaka laughed serenely.

He's a tricky one.

Toya was speechless; he could only stand there. How could he react to being told something like that after Hodaka had done something like this for him? He had no idea. Maybe this was just Hodaka's own brand of kindness, showing itself at last.

Warm feelings threatened to burst the seams of Toya's heart, confusing him. He didn't know what to call the feelings that he had experienced for Hodaka yesterday.

"In that case, sir, if you want to be extra nice to me, you have to write a manuscript."

"With your pool skills, you'll never manage to win enough."

"Then maybe I could offer my body." Toya offered this pitiful suggestion bashfully and Hodaka laughed.

"You come out a winner either way then."

The implication that Toya would be the only one

deriving any enjoyment from the experience dismayed him. Hodaka smirked at Toya's silence.

"Would you be willing to work off the cost of the salad today?"

"With what?"

"With the right to your body for one more day."

Without giving Toya a chance to respond, Hodaka captured his lips. Unable to contain himself, he aggressively wound their tongues over one another. Toya felt as if he would drown in the intensity of the kiss.

Toya wasn't satisfied. Though his body had been cured of its hunger, there was still something missing. He wanted to know what that was.

He was sure Hodaka was hiding it from him.

Chapter 8

Toya bought a can of sugar-free coffee from one of the vending machines in the hall by the elevator. He took a drink, but it wasn't enough to clear his head. His body was so dulled that he didn't want to move so much as a finger. He was always like this the day after sleeping with Hodaka.

The pleasure he had known before being with Hodaka was like the disappointing simplicity of a child's joke in comparison. Because of that, sex with him was something intense. The moment the man entered his thoughts, he was lost. His desire would overtake his reason at once, and he would shamelessly seek him out.

Their relationship had passed too far into the private domain to call it an editor-author relationship any longer. Hodaka reigned over Toya's body and Toya soaked up the sensuality that Hodaka gave him. That was all. It was a primal, uncomplicated relationship.

Unable to escape his condition, Toya spent his days in idleness.

There was no point in counting how many times they had slept together. Toya's relationship with Hodaka obsessed him. He felt like a teenager whose only thoughts were for sex. He'd gone to Hodaka's place three days in

a row, and every time he'd indulged in obscene behavior. But he still couldn't break off the relationship.

He was afraid to examine himself too closely, drowning in this immoral desire, and he always resisted doing it.

Toya's body was fragile once it had known pleasure. He always succumbed instantly to Hodaka's urging and persecution. He was always the one to seek him out. He came looking for him again and again, but nothing filled the void within Toya. It was his heart that hurt, not his body. Toya's heart had been unable to withstand the speed with which Hodaka remade his body.

It would have been so much easier if Hodaka could have commanded his heart as well as his body. Then Toya wouldn't have to think about any of this.

The only thing that saved him was the fact that Hodaka was a man of his word.

If Toya spent a night with him, Hodaka would write more of the manuscript. The agreement had been twenty pages each time, but apparently when he was in the mood, he would write more than that. The fact that Toya's body had become the basis for their exchange justified his actions. And at this rate, the manuscript would be finished within the year.

When it was done, his relationship with Hodaka would be over. Once Toya had the manuscript in hand, everything would work itself out.

He had to finish this quickly and go back to Miwa. He had to break off this guilt-ridden relationship and think only of her.

He knew that he was betraying Miwa. As Toya became colder toward her, the absurd perversion of what he was doing became more and more unbearable. He didn't have the guts to face Miwa. He'd broken off dates with her and had made excuses to postpone touring the ceremony hall with her for their wedding.

He felt sorry for himself. Everything he did lacked conviction. The idea that he would actually put an end to this at some point was itself no more than a comforting lie.

"Hey there, Sakurai." Yoshikawa, a coworker, waved at him and came over. "What's up? You don't look so good."

"It's nothing. I've just been kind of tired lately."

"Looks like you're still burning the candle at both ends. I heard Uchikura's new book is already being reprinted?"

"Yeah. They got a good cover image and the quotes for the jacket all came from good sources."

"How's it going with Hodaka? I heard a rumor about him and Mari Tanaka. I hope he's not letting himself get distracted from the manuscript."

"Mari who?" Toya was pretty sure she was an actress in her late twenties, played up as a beauty for the intellectual crowd. She'd recently participated in a joint interview with Hodaka for a magazine. He didn't know what was going on with them.

"Don't you watch TV or read the papers? She's even in the subway ads."

"I've never noticed her."

"The two met during some interview and she fell head over heels for Hodaka. She said she wants to get married and have a family, and apparently Hodaka's not opposed to the idea himself."

Marriage? The idea that Hodaka might marry someone sent a sharp thrill of pain through Toya's heart. He'd never even considered that before. He'd imagined that Hodaka was only interested in him. But Toya's inability to grapple with his own emotions had left him very little time to speculate about Hodaka's.

"He's never mentioned it to me."

"Well, that's what I've heard. Anyway, you look thinner. That part-timer Fujiwara says it makes you look sexier, but it can't be healthy."

"I've been feeling a little strange lately. And also," Toya walked over to one of the large picture windows, turning his back to Yoshikawa, and continued as if to himself, "I've been thinking about someone night and day. I've been thinking about them so much that I haven't been able to sleep. I guess it's started to affect me. Is there someone like that in your life?" Someone that he thought about constantly, morning, noon, and night; someone whose skin or scent excited him. Someone for whom he bore an agonizing, insatiable desire, seeking out their unique human body and being unable to claim it.

"That doesn't sound like you. Are you lovesick or something? I'm jealous that you can still be so passionate with your wedding date looming."

The word lovesick made Toya tremble.

"I'm just a little surprised; it doesn't fit your

image. You always looked pretty down-to-earth, but I guess you're the type to fall madly in love with someone and stay together for the rest of your lives."

"I don't think you could call it lovesickness, really," Toya said in a husky voice, feeling as if his heart was being crushed.

Whenever he thought about Hodaka, his heart warmed. He would be seized by emotions so powerful that he grew dizzy and had to struggle to contain them again.

"Well, what would you call it? You love her a lot, right? I mean, you're getting married soon. Enjoy it. Just don't let it interfere with your work."

The memory of that man alone inspired crazed emotions in Toya. Was it possible that he...loved him?

Hodaka had taken everything from Toya. He'd trampled over his self-respect, he'd stripped away his mild exterior and left him naked, and it still seemed as if he wanted more. Toya's body was a sexual vessel sculpted under Hodaka's hands.

"Oops, I've got to get to a meeting. See you later." Yoshikawa glanced down at his watch then cut their conversation short. Toya watched him walk away.

He didn't love Hodaka, and there was no way he ever would. Love would mean desiring Hodaka's heart, but he knew he wasn't allowed to ask for that.

He didn't want it. He was fine with their interaction being purely physical.

But still, the void inside Toya continued to grow. Nothing would cure his thirst, and it would drive him toward desperation and cheating. He thought he was

fine with being nothing more than a plaything. He didn't think he could ever be anything more.

But what about Hodaka? What was he to Hodaka?

Was it possible that Hodaka was spending sleepless nights thinking about Toya, too?

Would Hodaka...get married someday? Would the day come when someone else claimed him and he had no further use for his Toya doll?

Toya knew that this relationship would end sooner or later, so why was his heart still locked in such turmoil?

"Toya!"

Toya was running five minutes late for his date with Miwa when she spotted him. She waved at him from her seat at the table she taken for them. Toya was normally the one who arrived first, so this was extremely unusual.

"Sorry I'm late," Toya said as he slid into his seat.

"Don't worry about it. But it's so weird. Do you have a lot of work?"

"Kind of," Toya replied evasively, gazing past Miwa's shoulder.

Toya had continued going on dates with her since he'd started sleeping with Hodaka, but they hadn't had sex once. He was chasing Hodaka so much that he had no energy left. Besides, he couldn't feel sexual

towards Miwa. As his guilt at cheating on her increased, the frequency of their dates decreased.

"You never answer my text messages anymore. I'm worried."

"I'm sorry."

"Maybe you found someone you like better." She was trying to be lighthearted, but a hint of long and brooding thought colored the joke.

"Of course not. You've been suspecting me for long enough," Toya answered a little harshly. He shut his mouth quickly. This wasn't good. He would startle Miwa if he talked to her so sharply.

"I'm sorry. Are you mad at me, Toya?"

"I'm mad at your question. You're the only one I love, Miwa."

The moment he said it, Toya felt a disconnect in his own words. His heart cried out in painful appeal.

I love Miwa? I think so. I must.

But if he loved her, then why was it so unpleasant to see her like this? Was he thinking more about Hodaka than about Miwa, who was sitting right in front of him? Even now?

"Then let's pick a ceremony hall soon. My parents are a little worried about you. They think you have wedding blues."

"Isn't it usually women who get those?" Toya smirked and lowered his eyes. Her parents' fears were more accurate than they suspected.

"I *said* they were worried." Then suddenly, Miwa's voice dropped, as if she were trying to make sure no one overheard her. "You've been acting strange

lately. You're always on edge, and you seem bored when we're together. You used to email me every night, but now you don't even answer the mail I send you. I understand if you're busy, but—it really seems like there's another girl."

"But I keep telling you there isn't. Don't you think you're worrying too much?" Toya asked, forming each word carefully. He tried to smile but didn't quite succeed, only managing to twist his mouth.

"I hope so. But you've been acting weird ever since you told me you were going to work with Hodaka. I'm just worried maybe he's taking advantage of you because he's a big shot." Miwa forced a smile, as if to say that maybe she was imagining things, but of course Toya didn't find the joke very funny. "There have been rumors about Hodaka and that actress Mari Tanaka, right? Maybe if he settles down, he'll go easier on you. I keep hoping that, anyway."

Toya's heart ached. The same wound that Yoshikawa had opened at the office throbbed once more.

"You don't need to worry about that." Somehow he'd managed to squeeze out a brittle response. He still had that much control over himself.

"But—"

"It's none of your business!" Toya burst out violently. He caught himself and pressed his lips tightly together.

That was the first time he had ever shouted at Miwa.

"Toya—"

Tears welled up in Miwa's eyes. As Toya watched one roll down her cheek, bitter regrets assaulted him. "I'm sorry, Miwa. But Hodaka really doesn't matter."

That's a lie. Hodaka was the root beneath all the evil he had done. Hodaka was bad. He had made him this way. Toya needed to have sex with him. He was all he could think about, for sleepless night after sleepless night.

"Come on, Toya. Let's hurry up and get married. If you don't want to do that, we can at least register the marriage and live together. It makes me nervous staying the way we are." She had gotten control of her sobbing. Her voice as she spoke was like an interrupted cough. It was all wrapped in a sharpness that cut at Toya like a knife. Miwa reached out to him and rested her hand, wet with tears, on his own. "Please, Toya. You're the one who said we didn't need a fancy ceremony."

"I know. But please give me some time." He gave an unusually evasive answer and slid his hand out from under Miwa's. He knew how much that must have hurt her, but he had to do it.

It wasn't Miwa. She wasn't the one that Toya sought out above all else.

It was Hodaka. Hodaka was everything; Hodaka was all that he thought about. Night or day, the man ruled him and tried to drive him crazy.

...I love Hodaka. I love him.

It was only now that Toya finally realized it. He loved Hodaka, more than anything. In the beginning he had thought he was only a fan of Hodaka's writing,

but now he realized that he had been attracted to Kai Hodaka, the man himself. How could he keep denying those feelings?

Toya had only intended to sacrifice his body to the man's will. But at some point, he had found himself infatuated.

This was passion, being swept away on a wave of crashing emotions. That was why he had been driven to such reckless impulses when he thought about Hodaka in the middle of the night.

He had to be with him, physically. He knew that now, too.

His kisses, his scent, his skin, the heat of his body. When he thought about all that now, he needed no explanation for his crazed reaction to the man's body.

Toya's heart beat wildly with a bubbling urgency, heating the blood all the way to the tips of his fingers. When he thought about Hodaka, he felt like he was losing his mind.

He stopped to count and realized it had been ten days since he'd been able to see Hodaka. He was worried about the progress of the manuscript, but he could check up on that through email.

I want to see you so badly.

Toya was writing a cover letter to go with the author proofs when he stopped and shook his head.

"Way to go."

What was he doing? What was he thinking,

writing something like that? The letter wasn't even addressed to Hodaka.

He crumpled up the paper and threw it into the trash can at his feet before starting again. He shot off another letter and sealed it, then quickly got ready to go home.

"See you, Sakurai."

"Are you going home already, Mister Makihara? It's so early."

"The old lady's been on my case lately. How are things going with you and Hodaka? Is the manuscript coming along?"

"Probably."

"Oh, and we got the proposal for the dramatization of one of his books. We need to get him to sign off on it, so you need to get in touch with him."

"All right." Toya nodded, facing several projects that he had put off because they weren't urgent.

It was after ten p.m. There was always someone in the office, but after all the meetings today everyone had called it quits early, and Toya was the only one left. Makihara's footsteps grew distant.

I have to do something.

Toya sighed. Ever since he'd acknowledged how he felt for Hodaka, Toya had avoided him. He didn't know what to do about these feelings. He was overwhelmed.

It seemed to Toya that he'd spent almost his entire life in a bored slumber. He worked hard and he'd had confrontations with others, of course, but Toya had never experienced this tumult of irrational emotions

driving him to seek someone out before.

That was why he had such extraordinary difficulty in deciding what to do.

"Kai Hodaka," Toya murmured softly and closed his eyes. He rested his elbows on his desk and pressed his head into his hands.

Hodaka's cruel smile floated through his mind and an ember sparked into life, smoldering inside his body. Toya panicked. It was long after closing hours at the office, but he was still there. He felt foolish daydreaming about having sex with Hodaka.

Toya took several deep breaths and dug his fingers into his thighs.

There was something seriously wrong with him. His growing feelings made the search for an answer imperative. He needed to know if Hodaka felt the same way about him. What had that man made him into?

He knew the answer to that. Hodaka had to work with Toya, but otherwise he was nothing more than an intriguing plaything for him.

Toya wanted to be more than that—a selfish desire.

Toya reached for the phone on his desk, but his hand stopped as it touched the receiver. If he just pressed the numbers that were floating through his head, he would be able to hear Hodaka's voice...

But Toya didn't have the courage to do it.

"Sakurai!"

Toya jumped at the unexpected voice. He looked up and saw Makihara standing in front of him, a convenience store shopping bag in his hand.

"Still at it, eh? Here, have this."

"Oh—thank you."

"Once you finish up, let's go get a drink. Kobayakawa's project needed a lot of work, huh? Your fiancée is going to be upset if we wear you out before your wedding. Take it easy, huh?"

"I'll try to, sir." Toya laughed bashfully, and Makihara left again, waving. Watching him go, Toya was haunted by the feeling that he had betrayed everyone he knew.

What did people do at a time like this? Could they actually face the person they loved looking completely innocent when they were hiding such immobilizing passion?

Toya loved Hodaka, but he couldn't act on it. He didn't know how Hodaka felt about him and, more importantly, he was still with Miwa. He berated himself for surrendering to his lust and so lasciviously accepting Hodaka's body. He couldn't betray Miwa any more than he already had.

But why Hodaka? Why couldn't he be happy with Miwa, who loved him so eagerly? Why did he crave this man who didn't bear even a shred of affection for him?

He had already overcome the doubts and taboos of his homosexuality. With Hodaka, it was as if such barriers had never existed in the first place.

He tortured himself thinking about it, but he could never understand. Lost in a maze with no exit, struggling with an equation that had no solution, all he could do was take a chance.

He would be better off bundling these erratic emotions away deep in his heart, never to see Hodaka again. Toya should have made more of an effort to reclaim the tranquil days of his past.

"This is Miwa. Are you checking your messages? If you get this, call me."

"It's Miwa. You're still not back? I guess I'll call back later."

For once, the button on Toya's answering machine was blinking. It was Miwa. She'd left four messages, but after the first two he lost his resolution to hear the rest.

He felt vaguely hungry and opened his refrigerator. He hadn't been eating much lately, so there were only a few cups of yogurt, some wilted lettuce, a moldy orange, and expired milk. Unbidden, the memory of the more-or-less salad Hodaka had made for him rose fondly in his mind.

"I'm so stupid."

Maybe he had never actually been in love until now.

He wanted to see Hodaka, and not for sex. But what would Toya say if he saw him? He didn't even know what he should do. He wanted to convince himself that Hodaka was still real—with his hands and with his body. Everything that defined Toya's life had fallen to pieces since meeting Hodaka. He felt like he was being strung along by Hodaka, doing everything at his pace.

He took a shower, then fell lazily into bed. As he was drifting into the obscurity of sleep, a sound tore apart his little world of tranquility. The phone was ringing.

It was probably Miwa again. Toya stretched out a hand and picked up the phone. "This is Sakurai."

"Toya? It's your mother."

"Oh, hi. Is something wrong? Why are you calling so late?"

"Nothing's wrong. You just haven't called lately, so I was afraid something might be wrong with you. How are the wedding plans going?"

He had a feeling he knew where this was going. Miwa must have gone crying to his mother, telling her how strangely he'd been acting. The two of them got along like mother and daughter, and they talked to each other all the time.

"Miwa told you that, didn't she?"

"So I can get right to the point, then. I'm surprised at you, Toya. What are you doing upsetting this girl before your wedding? Right now she's thinking about what the rest of her life will be like. If you act like this just as you're about to become her husband, Miwa will get confused about what she should do."

"She's not the only one," Toya muttered in a self-mocking tone.

"What was that?"

"I'm sorry. I'm tired. If you want to talk, could you call me back later?"

Toya hung up and sank back into bed. Sleep seemed far away, his mind a sharp blankness. But he had

to sleep to be ready for tomorrow.

The phone rang again beside his pillow. Toya picked it up in irritation and shouted, "I told you to call back later if you wanted to talk."

A tenor voice answered him. "Excuse me. Were you in the middle of something?"

The instant Toya heard the voice, his heart leapt, and he felt a chill run through him. "Mister Hodaka! I'm sorry!"

"I don't mind. But it seems like you've been brushing me off lately. Is something wrong?"

"I apologize. I've had my hands full these past few days."

The timing of this call made it seem as if Hodaka had somehow detected the chaos in Toya's heart.

Toya's emotions gravitated to Hodaka so much that he couldn't escape. It scared him how weak he was. He had only avoided Hodaka because of how that dependence terrified him.

"You don't want my manuscript anymore?"

"Of course I do!"

"You haven't been coming by, so I stopped writing. How should we proceed?"

That jerk. It was the lowest act of cowardice to force the decision onto Toya when Hodaka had slept with him for no good reason at all.

"We're still eager to receive your manuscript, sir."

"Then you need to cheer me up a little bit. Aren't you starting to miss me, too?"

He was trying to muddle Toya's senses with the

carefree beauty of his pronunciation. "I—"

"It's been more than two weeks since you last came here. I didn't think you were that patient."

Toya said nothing, his lips pressed tightly together.

"Toya." Hodaka said his name with a rare kindness, and Toya's heart ached. The pounding of his heart echoed in his ears. He was sure even Hodaka must have been able to hear it. "How have you been relieving your body's sick desires since we last saw each other? Or did you find someone new?"

"I've done nothing of the kind." Toya put on a brave show, but his voice wavered as he denied Hodaka's accusation. He was afraid Hodaka would see through him.

"But how can you stand to sleep alone? Last time, you didn't see me for three days and you wanted me so badly that you came here."

It was only Hodaka that he wanted. He was the only thing Toya sought. His lust was disgraceful. Toya let out a long sigh as he struggled to contain the aching in his flesh. "Why do you always do that? I wouldn't sleep with anyone but you, sir."

"Except your fiancée, I suppose?"

The bitter words pierced Toya's heart. When he was with Hodaka, it was easy for Toya to forget all about Miwa. Hodaka had stolen his heart. He was all Toya thought about. Toya fought back the naïve impulse to tell him that. He didn't know what would come of a rash confession. He had to be careful.

"That's none of your business, Mister Hodaka."

"Maybe you're right."

"I need to ask you this: why are you with me? It's not fair to act like it's all my fault."

Hodaka's behavior gave the impression that he derived no pleasure from anything. If that was the case, fine. But it was obvious at a glance that Toya satisfied Hodaka's desire, and it hurt Toya that Hodaka never pursued him.

"Why?" Hodaka's voice rose at the end, as if in amusement. "You want a reason?"

Toya just wanted him to say something. He didn't care if it was a lie. He wanted him to say that he liked Toya, even if it was only a little bit. He wanted him to say that he was special. Then Toya would be his. He would do anything for him.

He couldn't deny it. That was how obsessed he was with Hodaka.

"There's only one reason. I promised to write a miserable story for you." Hodaka's words were unusually vicious.

"A miserable story?"

"I thought you said you liked miserable stories, Toya?"

Toya had used those exact words at their first meeting. But he still didn't understand what Hodaka meant.

"It's the story of a man who's forced to face the fact that he's debauched. He betrays his girlfriend to spread his legs for a man. I doubt you could find anything worse."

Toya had no response to this revelation.

Had Hodaka really made Toya into his main character and written about all this? Had he told the story of Toya's irredeemable descent into hell? He couldn't believe it. But on the other hand, it was something Hodaka would have no qualms about doing.

The words "experiment" and "plaything" flashed through Toya's mind. He opened his mouth, his tongue thick and dry.

"What? You can't be serious, you—"

"I make it a policy to never lie. But you enjoyed the story, didn't you? You thought it was interesting." There was no trace of dishonesty in Hodaka's voice. That only sped Toya's breakdown.

It's true—all of it.

This is too much. How completely, utterly...inhuman.

Kai Hodaka was an extraordinarily detached man. He was obliterating more than just Toya's admiration for him now, more than Toya's self-respect. He was dragging Toya's yearning for him through the mud.

"Am I just a—a tool for you? A doll you can play with and force to do whatever you want it to?"

"I never said that."

"I didn't make that bet with you for this! I—I'm—"

Toya couldn't say any more. He hung up the phone.

There were no more calls from Hodaka.

This was what Yoshimi and the others had really meant when they'd said Hodaka was morally bankrupt.

A dry laugh bubbled out of him. At last, he'd finally understood. Toya had been a fool. He'd been an idiot to fall in love with a man like Hodaka.

Hodaka had always tried to hold Toya at his mercy. He'd brought him to disgrace with his erotic behavior and double-edged mind-games. If everything followed the plot, it made sense.

Toya knew, finally, that he was completely incompatible with Hodaka; that he had fallen in love with the wrong person. This needed to end.

Hearing Hodaka's voice made his heart ache, made him wish to feel the man's breath on his skin. How could he survive being ground into the dust by someone so special? Why had he fallen so deeply into such an immoral love?

He wanted to laugh at how quickly his love evaporated after so recently realizing how he felt, but still he couldn't help being attracted to the man's independent spirit; or to the loneliness that shrouded his body.

Toya smirked at his foolish indecision, so like him. He couldn't lock away the pain his heart felt when he thought about Hodaka.

Chapter 9

The next day, Toya slipped his letter of resignation into his briefcase and went to work.

It might get problematic if he said he wanted to be taken off Hodaka's project. He didn't know what had caused others to stop working with Hodaka, but Toya's reasons were strictly personal.

He'd had enough. It was over.

Having been betrayed by Hodaka in such an underhanded way, Toya no longer believed he could deal with him calmly, even in a business setting. More importantly, he didn't know if Hodaka would be willing to end their contract of exchange through Toya's body. If Hodaka forced Toya while he felt like this, the next time would break Toya.

This decision was the result of a full night's thought. Toya's selfishness had reduced everything to shambles, so he needed to make a clean break and quit. He had to act as if nothing had happened.

As soon as he got to work, he took Makihara into one of the meeting rooms to break the news to him. "Mister Makihara, there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

Makihara took one look at Toya's solemn

expression and, sighing, asked, "Is this about Hodaka?"

Makihara's observation provoked a sharp sensation in Toya's fingertips, as if all the blood were draining away. "Why would you ask that?"

"You haven't been yourself for a long time. You seem pretty broken down physically, too."

"Then I guess I can dispense with explanations. I'd like to be taken off his project."

Makihara said nothing.

"The problem is my own lack of professionalism. I'm prepared for whatever consequences might come of this." Toya held his letter of resignation out to Makihara, but Makihara pushed it back at him.

"You're getting married soon, aren't you? How do you expect to support a family if you quit your job?"

Toya had forgotten all about that. He had to begin a new life with Miwa, but that fact had completely slipped his mind. He couldn't believe how self-involved he'd become. "I think I still have time to find a new job."

"Don't be ridiculous. If they go through with layoffs because of the budget, we're going to be short-handed. We're not going to let you go easily."

Makihara set his cigarette in an ashtray as he crushed Toya's request.

"I know all about Hodaka. You've put up with him for a long time without complaint. I know how very difficult it must have been for you. You don't need to worry about it anymore."

Makihara's kind words relaxed Toya's heart, which had been so tense. "I'm sorry. I—I wanted to do

my best, but I just wasn't up to it."

"If you just can't deal with him, there's not a lot you can do. Even if you tell yourself you need to get the job done, in the end you need to be able to interact as fellow human beings."

Toya loved the feeling of aloofness that Hodaka radiated. The ambiance surrounding him; the solitude that starkly separated him from the world. He neither drove away the people around him, nor sought them out.

"The manuscript is in progress, but I haven't been able to verify his recent work."

"If he's already started, that's good news. He's a quick writer, so once he gets going, it'll come along quickly. It's a huge success that you were able to get him to start writing in the first place."

Makihara clapped him on the shoulder reassuringly. Toya just stood there, unable to respond.

"Don't worry about it. I'll take over Hodaka's project for the time being."

Toya had hoped for this, but still he couldn't believe how it had all turned out.

Yesterday, his one love, whose birth he hadn't even noticed, had ended, and now he had finished the work to entirely cut off his relationship with Hodaka.

His heart ached, twisting tightly around itself, but Toya tried to ignore it.

This is for the best. Definitely for the best... Toya told himself as he crumpled up his resignation letter and threw it in the trash.

"The food was amazing! I didn't expect it to be that good. I think I ate too much."

There had been fewer people at the last bridal fair of the year than they'd expected. The menus were prepared by only the most famous hotels in the city and the food wasn't bad, but whenever Toya thought of serving it at his and Miwa's wedding, he found it impossible to swallow. It depressed him when he thought of Miwa and how happy she looked beside him.

Toya had considered calling the wedding off, but he thought he might be able to forget about Hodaka once he and Miwa were married and started living together. He was so naïve. How could he try to go back to his girlfriend as if nothing were the matter after betraying her so many times? He was acting deplorably and it made him sick.

"This hotel's the best so far, don't you think? I like it."

"They're a little more expensive. We'd have to figure out some way to manage that."

"That could be a problem. But I really think this hotel's had the best atmosphere so far."

Miwa had good reason to be so excited. The hotel still had openings in its schedule, so they could still pull off a spring wedding despite how late in the year it was.

He would have preferred something less fancy, but he could take it as atonement for blowing it off until now. And if it made Miwa happy, then he didn't really mind. Besides, he didn't feel comfortable registering the marriage and moving in with Miwa any earlier than that.

He didn't know when it had happened, but at some point the word marriage had ceased to mean anything to him. He lacked even the slightest confidence that he could make Miwa happy.

He loved someone else, someone whose warmth he wanted to feel again, so much that it drove him mad. Because of that, he had cheated on Miwa and become an unfaithful man of the worst kind. The way things stood now, he might be able to wipe it all from his mind once they were married. He might be able to seal Hodaka in the past.

The more he thought about it, the more he was immobilized by the mire of anxiety sucking him in. He was terrified of the wild emotions within him. He couldn't even confront them.

"If our parents were here, they'd tell us not to skimp," Miwa said, then stopped in her tracks with a gasp.

"What is it?" Toya looked lost. He followed Miwa's gaze all the way to its end: Hodaka.

Completely at ease as he paraded his beautiful face in public, Hodaka saw Toya standing in mute stillness and smiled. "I haven't seen you in a while."

"I apologize for not keeping in touch better." Toya dipped his head in a slow bow. He hadn't actually gone to see Hodaka to tell him that Makihara was taking over for him. He'd just told him over the phone. It had been quite some time since they had last seen each other, and so he felt awkward.

"What a strange place to run into each other. Would you like to get something to eat?"

"No. There's a bridal fair today, so we're taking a look at what's available."

"Oh, I see. When are you planning on having the ceremony?"

"We're hoping for April. What brings you here, sir?" It was a shallow exchange of social trifles.

"I had an interview today. It just wrapped up."

"I hope it wasn't too much trouble. How's the manuscript going?"

"All right, I suppose."

They were sailing smoothly through the moment with this string of empty words. Toya was making a conscious effort to not look Hodaka in the eyes.

"So this is your fiancée?" He glanced over at Miwa. Her cheeks flushed at even this small amount of attention, and she gazed at Hodaka rapturously. Toya found it tedious.

"Yes, I'm Miwa Okamura. I'm—I'm a huge fan of yours, Mister Hodaka!"

"Sakurai has told me about you."

Why did Toya feel as if his heart had been torn out when Hodaka called him by his last name?

"Could I—could I shake your hand? Please?"

"Of course."

The man lightly squeezed Miwa's right hand and covered both with his left hand, as if swallowing them up. It was exactly the same handshake he had once given Toya.

"I'm sorry, but could I borrow your boyfriend for a minute? I need to talk to him."

"Yes, of course. I'll be waiting in the lobby,"

Miwa answered in a voice high with excitement and waved to Toya. He wanted to tell her that being considerate right now was the worst thing she could have done. His teeth ground together.

"Come," Hodaka said haughtily, leading Toya away.

"Where are we going, sir?"

"She probably won't let me keep you for too long. I just wanted to talk," Hodaka told him, guiding him to a spot tucked away at the back of the lobby. There were a few telephones hanging on the wall, each one partitioned into its own little room.

Suddenly, Hodaka grabbed Toya's shoulder and pushed him carelessly toward a phone booth. Shoved into the room, his back to Hodaka, Toya frowned unconsciously.

"I don't care that you stopped being my editor, but why don't you come to see me?"

"Since I'm no longer your editor, I have no reason to see you."

"Hmph."

Toya heard him grunt softly beside his ear and felt a shuddering ache run through his groin at the same instant.

"Then let me ask you a personal question. Did you get bored with my body?"

"That's not a fair question."

"I want to know if you got tired of me. It's a yes or no question."

Hodaka's body curved over him, and Toya retreated instinctively, pressing back against the

telephone. Suddenly Hodaka's hand reached around Toya's body and pressed against the fabric covering his chest. Toya inhaled sharply. Hodaka pinched his nipple, and a weak cry escaped Toya.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you? That proves that you're starving for me."

"No!" Toya tried to argue, but in vain. What could he possibly say to the man who knew every part of Toya's body so intimately?

"I always thought you were incredibly stubborn. Why are you resisting so much?"

Hodaka's lips brushed the nape of Toya's neck, and his body trembled at the stimulation. Toya found himself thinking about how long it had been since Hodaka had taken him, even though he knew that once he'd thought about it, he wouldn't be able to get away.

"I'm not resisting. I'm—I'm getting married."

"So?"

"So—I won't betray her any more than I already have," Toya whispered, his voice tense, almost panting. "Everything I did with you—it was all a mistake. I don't know what I was thinking, trying to get the manuscript from you like that."

Talking only about the manuscript was Toya's only weapon, but really, he had only used sex to get the manuscript at the beginning. After that, Toya had been driven to sleep with Hodaka by his own lust.

"I didn't say you couldn't get married. You can just come see me whenever the mood strikes you."

Toya felt a little sick at his nonchalance. For Hodaka, the union of two bodies had no greater meaning.

He had no soul. Sex was nothing but an interaction between bodies for him.

"I've heard rumors that you're getting married, too, sir."

"Rumors don't mean anything." Hodaka offhandedly dismissed Toya's suspicions without directly answering them. "Anyway, don't think of it as betraying someone else. You're just doing something to get what you want."

The man reached up from behind to touch Toya's lips and forced his mouth open. As his fingers pushed inside, Toya felt himself being intoxicated by the sweet sensation of force inside his mouth. Hodaka stroked the softest part of his mouth, and Toya writhed under the flood of pleasure.

"If you feel that guilty about it, you should tell your fiancée that you gave your body to a man, and that you liked it."

"Nngh!" Unable to bear the excitement, Toya let out the breath he had been holding back. Hodaka's left hand stroked Toya's thigh. He wanted him to go closer to what really mattered, but Hodaka was as petty as ever.

"You love it when I do this to you. Why bother fighting it?"

Yes, Toya did love it. He loved Hodaka. When Hodaka touched him now, it meant so much more because it was him. It would have been pointless without him. It would have meant nothing to Toya if it were anyone else.

But there could be no mistake that this man who devastated and humiliated others would never recognize

Toya's feelings, and Toya could never bring himself to say how he felt. It would only have pleased Hodaka to learn that everything was following the plot of his book. There would be no more miserable endings for Toya.

"You're just having fun by degrading me so much, sir." Toya knew that Hodaka was mocking him, using him as an instrument for his own amusement. It must have been gratifying to see Toya overcome by his carnality and suffering.

"We've both been having fun."

Toya felt as if he might laugh rather than cry from the force of his sorrow. He gathered all of his strength and pushed the man's body away. "Then I think we've had enough fun. I won't be obeying your whims anymore."

"Why are you resisting? What you want is my manuscript. I'm just trying to play out my role for you."

Toya had turned around at last, looking straight at Hodaka as he declared, "What I want is your heart."

Toya couldn't believe he had let these words slip out, but Hodaka shrugged them off as if they were nothing. "Is that all? I didn't know I could have you so cheap."

Despite the fact that he wrote such accurate descriptions of people's feelings in his books, despite the fact that he could see through people so easily, there were apparently still some things that Hodaka didn't understand.

And even though that had been Hodaka's answer, even though there was nothing worse Hodaka could do to hurt him, Toya still knew that he loved

Hodaka. He wanted Hodaka's heart. He didn't need anything but to kiss him.

But it was wrong to want that. Hodaka was a different kind of person. His values, his way of thinking, his philosophy—they were all different. He didn't seek out other people. He had probably never been enslaved by love. Toya knew deep down that he had been a fool to fall in love with a man like this. Why had they even met? Why had they joined their bodies?

The more he got to know Hodaka, the more Toya was bewitched by his complicated personality. He couldn't help it.

"I have no intention of ever seeing you again. You've been transferred to another editor, so please don't concern yourself with me any further."

Hodaka's expression never changed as Toya turned him away with a trembling voice. Toya elbowed him aside and left the booth. He ran to the bathroom. All the blood had drained from his face, betraying the cold delivery he had managed. He couldn't go see Miwa like this.

He was in pain. Everything hurt, and it was more than he could bear.

How could he forget about Hodaka? How could he be liberated from this suffering?

Toya couldn't leave Miwa waiting for too long, though, and he turned his unsteady steps toward the lobby. He saw her sitting on a sofa looking bored, flipping through a book.

"Miwa—I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"Oh, Toya. Are you all right? You look terrible."

"I'm fine," Toya said, straining. He wanted to tell her everything. How wonderful it would be to confess it all.

"Don't push yourself. You look really sick. Come on, sit down."

He sat down beside her and held his head in both hands. His head was throbbing. The pain in his heart was clawing at him desperately, warning him that it might shatter.

He would never see Hodaka again. Never. This was the last time. Toya would go crazy otherwise. His heart would break into a thousand pieces.

This was what it meant to feel cutting pain. This desperation was what "heartsick" meant. Toya had never known it before. He wished he had never found out. He didn't know if he could go on living with this pain, if he'd ever forget it once he'd learned it. Could he spend his life with Miwa, the woman sitting beside him now?

Toya didn't think so. Not after he'd met Hodaka.

"I need to tell you something."

Toya raised his head, finally calming down, and looked at the woman beside him.

"What is it?"

"I want to call off the wedding."

Toya's unexpected words froze Miwa's smiling face in an instant.

"I'm sorry, Miwa."

"What are you talking about, Toya?" She was trying to laugh it off as a bad joke, but he was serious.

"I'm sorry. But I mean it. I can't marry you."

He couldn't betray Miwa anymore. He loved her. And because he loved her, he couldn't marry her. He didn't have the power to make her happy so long as his heart belonged to Hodaka.

Hodaka's existence had enslaved Toya. It was as if a brand had been seared into his heart, proclaiming who its owner was.

Chapter 10

Remembering was the worst part.

The more he tried to forget, the more powerfully the bitter, frenzied memories would seize Toya and refuse to let go. But as he buried himself in his work, he began to feel that he could forget all of it.

He hadn't put one of Hodaka's books into his briefcase to read on the train yet. He couldn't stand to get rid of them, so he had packed all of the books away in a cardboard box to keep them out of sight. Such girlish behavior made him feel absurd, but he had to do it, or he would have lost the determination necessary to forget about Hodaka.

January came, and the new year began.

As the spirit of the holidays was wearing off, he went back to work. When he arrived, Toya was stopped cold by the look of depression on Makihara's face.

"Are you all right, Mister Makihara?"

"Hodaka said he finished the manuscript, but he won't give it to me. What's gotten into him this time?"

Toya's eyes widened at Makihara's surprising explanation. "It's done?"

"So he said. I don't know what to do."

"I can't believe it!" Toya's voice cracked with excitement.

He wanted to read it. He wanted to know what kind of book Hodaka's manuscript had become. He was supposed to have cut off all connection with the man, but now that the moment had come, that decision gave way easily.

But Toya wasn't sure that he would be able to keep his cool if he saw Hodaka face to face or heard his voice.

Makihara regarded Toya, whose warring emotions had rendered him speechless, and gave him a friendly clap on the shoulder. "It's all right. You don't need to worry about it."

"But—I mean, it could my fault. Why don't I give him a call?"

The people in the office were being uniformly nice to Toya, since he had just broken off his engagement, but it had been Toya's own decision to turn over editing responsibilities for Hodaka. If Hodaka was upset about that, Toya was the only one who could take the blame.

"Are you sure?"

Seeing the relief on Makihara's face, Toya was convinced that he had to do it.

When he called Hodaka's house, the maid answered and told him that he had been gone for two days. He hadn't set a day for his return or told her where he was going.

After some thought, Toya decided to use his personal phone to try Hodaka's cell phone. After several tries, Hodaka picked up.

"Haven't heard from you in a while."

"I apologize for that. Actually, I'm calling about

the manuscript we wanted from you."

"You get right to the point, don't you? Not even a hint of friendliness."

Hodaka's voice was venomous, as if he had sensed Toya's desire to get this conversation over with quickly.

"I apologize. But I heard that you'd finished writing."

"I promised to give the manuscript to you. If you want it, come here and get it."

Toya wanted to read it right away, but he decided not to suggest that Hodaka e-mail it to him. This was the manuscript that he had wanted so badly. If Hodaka got into a bad mood at this point, he might threaten to take it to another publisher. That was too terrible to even contemplate.

"You're acting a bit childish, sir."

"It's good to be unpredictable every once in a while, don't you think?"

"I'll come pick it up, then. Where can I find you?"

"Well, now. It's not much fun if you don't have to look for me."

This was immature, even for Hodaka, but in another sense it was exactly like him. Toya had been getting more and more irritated during their conversation, but if he let it show, he would lose.

"But I can't just go out and search at random. Can you at least give me a hint?"

"Are you trying to tell me you can't figure it out, even though we spent so much time together?"

"All right. I'll come looking for you," Toya said, half out of desperation, then hung up.

He felt stupid getting so worked up over nothing, but he couldn't take it back now. Toya let out a deep sigh.

"How'd it go?"

Toya shrugged at Makihara's question. "He wants me to go look for him, even though I have no idea where he is."

"So Hodaka's sulking? That's not like him."

"I think he's just picking on me because I dropped his project."

Makihara shook his head at that, an unusually depressed look on his face. "If he's sulking or something, he must like you a lot."

"I don't think that's the case." After all, Hodaka was the one who had destroyed everything. He had captured Toya, his fan and managing editor, and told him that he would write a "miserable" story for him. It was impossible for Toya to imagine that Hodaka liked him.

"Hodaka's got money, talent, looks—the works. He's sharp, and can get people do what he wants without even trying."

"And?"

"The way I see it, he's not morally bankrupt *or* twisted. He just doesn't know how to interact with other people. But he's so privileged that everyone pampers him. I suspect he grew up without ever learning the most important lessons of life."

Toya's eyes widened at this unexpected declaration.

"So he thought he could trust you. You tend to

make a good first impression and you're patient. It was a little surprising that you'd be the first one to put up the white flag."

Toya was speechless.

"I'm sure Hodaka didn't expect you'd give up on him. You look meek and wishy-washy, but you're a decisive person and when the time comes to do something, you do it. Since you walked out on Hodaka before he realized that, he's been brooding over you."

Toya had never considered that. He had been so impatient with Hodaka for not revealing his true self that he'd given up. But maybe Hodaka wasn't refusing to show himself; maybe he just didn't know how to do it. Maybe he didn't know how to make allowances for other people's lives, or how to seek them out.

If that was the case, maybe Toya should have asked him. If Toya had spoken up about his feelings without wasting time on confusion, things might have been different.

But it was a little late to be wondering that, and of course there was no answer to be found.

"But I didn't walk out on Hodaka. It was because he—I felt like he was toying with me. When he said I was intriguing, I didn't take it seriously. I couldn't put up with him anymore."

"I think you really did interest him. Hodaka is honest about those things."

"Honest?" Toya's eyes were as round as plates. It didn't seem right to use that word to describe Hodaka.

"Don't tell me you never noticed? Hodaka's serious about those things. He always keeps his promises

and never misses a deadline. He hates lying and being lied to, so he always sees right through the flattery of his editors. He can be a pain to work with. I guess since he acts the way he does, it can be hard to tell."

"No way."

It was impossible.

It wasn't a lie? Had Hodaka been telling him the truth the entire time?

As if a wall had collapsed, Hodaka's words resurfaced in Toya's memory one after another. That time, and that time—and that time, too. Did his words always mirror his intentions?

"He's an easy man to misunderstand—Hey, Sakurai! Sakurai!"

Toya ran off without hearing the rest of Makihara's words.

Hodaka might have been perverse enough to be at his apartment and then tell Toya to go look for him.

Toya stopped by his place near Hamarikyū with some hope, but Hodaka wasn't there after all. The maid didn't seem to be lying, either.

After some long deliberation, Toya decided to try the manor in Hayama that Hodaka had told him about. He had no idea if Hodaka would be there or not, but he'd said that he still went there often. There was some support for this gamble.

Toya thought he remembered Hodaka telling him the house was beside the Imperial villa. With that

much information, he could probably find it by just catching a taxi at the station.

Am I trying to destroy myself?

If he delivered himself to Hodaka, the things he had been trying to suppress would come surging back to the surface.

Hodaka really must have been mocking Toya's all-too-human emotions.

Maybe Toya had started to bore him. He didn't know what it was that Hodaka wanted, and he couldn't entertain him now that he'd devolved into another tedious person trapped by love.

But Toya couldn't ignore this last ray of hope. He was a foolish man; he would go to any lengths.

"You wanted the author Hodaka who lives next to the Imperial villa? This is the place," the driver said, jolting Toya to his senses. Even here, Hodaka was so famous everyone knew which house was his.

There wasn't a single cloud in the sky above, and the sound of waves completed the image of the peaceful cottage.

Beyond the heavy wooden gate stood a slightly rundown but elegant mansion. There was a nameplate hanging on the gate bearing the name "Hodaka."

Before Toya could ring the bell on the intercom, the gate swung open with a rusty creak, almost as if Toya was being invited inside. Toya walked through the gate into the grounds, as if led by magic.

Grass rolled out on either side of the driveway, and pruned trees grew lushly. The silent atmosphere held the scent of the ocean.

Toya started walking toward the front door, but his eyes came to rest on a gazebo beside the garden. Several pieces of furniture were inside it, and Hodaka was stretched out serenely in a chair.

His eyes were closed peacefully, dozing. This was the first time Toya had seen Hodaka like this, and as he drew nearer to call out to him, he found himself enchanted.

Hodaka's lips moved slightly as he slept. Toya couldn't help feeling a deep melancholy at the way Hodaka looked, displaying his vulnerability. He was truly alone, this man.

How often had Hodaka done this? Would he continue his vicious games that only served to hurt others?

If he wasn't aware of his solitude himself, Toya felt sorry for him.

Unable to bear it any longer, Toya reached out a hand and placed a kiss on Hodaka's forehead. Hodaka's eyelids fluttered, and he slowly opened his eyes.

Even once he had registered Toya's presence, he showed no sign of surprise. His lips formed a slight smile.

"I had a dream about you."

"I'm honored."

"I didn't think a prince would come and wake me up. You figured out where I was pretty quickly."

Hodaka smiled as he gazed at Toya.

"You once told me, sir, that you still come here often to use the home theater."

"So you want the manuscript even though you



didn't want to see me? You're pretty selfish."

"Don't you think you're the one being selfish, sir?"

"I guess that makes two of us, then," Hodaka said and looked up at Toya. His eyes were surprisingly gentle.

"There's just one thing I'd like to know."

"What's that?"

"Why did you pick me? Why sleep with me? You could have written a miserable story without having to do that."

After a long, uncomfortable silence, Hodaka answered. "You're interesting."

"Just interesting?"

"I don't know." Hodaka shrugged. "I just wanted to know what made you what you are. Humans are formed by more than flesh and bone. I wanted to know what was there, just under your skin—" His hand reached out and gently caressed Toya's cheek, as if he were reassuring himself of Toya's existence. "As an editor, Toya Sakurai is excellent. Friendly, but too bland and composed. That was what I'd heard about you."

Toya couldn't shake away the fingers that stroked his hair and played with his earlobe.

"But the way I saw it, you were much more pure, much more single-minded than the world judged you to be, and much more passionate."

"More passionate? What do you—?" It was a word Toya did not often associate with himself. But the impulses that had been driving Toya lately surely deserved to be called passionate.

"You're a much bigger coward than other people, always afraid of being broken. The strength of your self control comes from the fact that you know that if you let your passions direct you, you'll be destroyed. As lovely as you are, the reason you try to rein yourself in and live a normal life is that you fear the intense emotions within you."

"You're entitled to your opinion. I'm a dull man, with nothing to redeem me but my work."

"You don't honestly think a person like that would interest me, do you?" Hodaka's hand dropped from Toya's hair. "But the game is over. I've got the manuscript and other materials ready. You can take it and go."

Toya was unable to speak. All he could manage was to stand there. Hodaka frowned, as if he found his behavior suspicious. "Is something wrong?"

"You're a horrible person. Always forcing me to be the one to choose," Toya muttered in a strained voice. After hearing Hodaka speak his mind, Toya could no longer retreat back to Tokyo, tail between his legs.

"I'm not very smart, so I can only ever choose one person. I'm not capable of choosing more than that." An ocean breeze gusted, caressing Toya's cheek. "If I chose Miwa, I'd be betraying myself as well as her. And I don't want to betray anyone anymore. That's why I couldn't be with her—"

It was a sin to betray anyone: others as well as oneself. Whatever he chose, Toya would be sinning against all of humanity.

So which was worse? Which one would cause

the deeper betrayal?

"I love you." Toya passed his arms around the man's neck and continued in a shaking voice, "Since you chose me, I—I fell in love with you."

He knew he loved this man, who lived under a shroud of loneliness, who was more awkward than anyone he knew. As long as it came from Hodaka, Toya didn't even care if disappointment was all he got in exchange for his love.

"But if you don't feel anything for me, I can't be with you. I just want to be special to you. I can't bear not to be. I don't ever want to betray anyone ever again."

That was probably a lot to ask.

Toya didn't care if he couldn't alleviate Hodaka's solitude; he just wanted to be with him. Was wishing only to love him too much? Toya wanted to monopolize the smiles he gave him, his sulky expressions, his awkwardness: everything.

"This is how you wanted to see me, isn't it? Completely overwhelmed by these feelings that I didn't even know I had, without anywhere left to run?"

"Do you want me to answer that?"

"Yes."

Hodaka shrugged his shoulders, as if he were toying with Toya's sincerity. "All I wanted was to teach you who you were."

The unexpectedness of this answer rendered Toya speechless. Were the harsh words that Hodaka had used since the very beginning a sign of his affection?

"But all you want is my body."

"That distinction is meaningless. While you

slept with me, at least, your body and soul belonged only to me. It was just icing on the cake that I managed to make you enjoy it, too."

Toya couldn't get upset at such a docile confession. Hodaka was saying that everything had been for Toya's benefit, that he had been interested in him and felt that he wanted to possess him, and tried to make him enjoy it.

It sounded like he loved Toya.

"Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

"Because you weren't listening."

"What?"

"I never break my promises or tell lies. Haven't you figured that out?"

A daze fell over Toya as he suddenly recalled Makihara's speech.

Hodaka really was honest to a fault. He wouldn't lie even when people begged him to do it.

His true intention was always hard to see because his voice and behavior were deceptive, but he only ever spoke the truth. But despite that, Toya had been swayed by an ignorant rumor that Hodaka was "morally bankrupt." He hadn't ever given him the benefit of the doubt.

Hodaka was astute when it came to the subtleties of other people's emotions, but incredibly dim about his own. No matter how often he shared his body with someone, he would never be able to give over his heart.

He had everything—money, talent, and looks; but it counted for nothing.

He took everything he wanted from people, but

there was nothing he could call his own.

Hodaka was almost laughably awkward, sad, and, more than anything else, alone.

He probably didn't even realize that something was missing inside him. Nor would he understand the fact that it would be impossible to win someone's heart when he treated them as if their bodies didn't matter.

"I want your heart. I want you."

"I told you, that much is easy. I'll give you anything you want," Hodaka interrupted, as if Toya's request meant nothing to him.

"You're all alone, aren't you, sir? I want to be the only one for you."

"I'm yours."

Toya flushed at Hodaka's effortless declaration. Compared to Hodaka's simple words, Toya felt as if his whole-hearted confession was having almost no effect.

"If you're mine, then I'll give you my heart. I make it a policy not to need anyone else, but I wouldn't mind having you around."

"You mean that you'd rather be with me than be alone?"

Hodaka smiled slightly but didn't answer the question.

"You're pretty devious."

Toya wrapped his arms around Hodaka's neck and pressed his lips to his. He trusted his weight to Hodaka, leaning over his body. Toya felt his feet wobbling, but he wanted to taste Hodaka so badly.

The flurry of their kisses was so intimate it seemed their bodies would melt together. Toya felt dizzy.

"That's what people call love. Normal people, anyway," Toya whispered in the pauses between their kisses. "You want to be with me because I intrigue you. That tells me that you love me."

Hodaka wasn't a normal person, so he may not have realized the truth of that.

"You think I—? That's a good one."

Hodaka's lips sucked in Toya's own and he licked them. He tasted them, rolling his tongue inside Toya's mouth. Toya shuddered at the feeling of Hodaka's tongue trailing over his gums. The chair began to creak loudly. It seemed that the chair had even more difficulty bearing its trial than Toya did. It sounded as if it would break long before Toya did.

Even though he had just laid his heart bare, this thought threatened to set Toya giggling. Seeing Toya on the verge of laughter, Hodaka whispered in his incomparably beautiful voice, "Try to be a little more serious when you kiss me."

It had been a very long time since Toya had been pinned against a bed. Not since the first time they'd slept together.

The canopied bed was old, like an antique, but it was still luxurious. Hodaka had a caretaker come by regularly to maintain the room. The linens were flawlessly clean.

As soon as they'd entered the bedroom, they embraced and kissed each other. Impatient fingers loosened buttons and ties and threw the clothes to the floor.

Hodaka pressed a kiss against Toya's chest and gently bit down on his sensitive nipples. Toya shook his head.

"Stop—"

"You always say that," Hodaka muttered incredulously as he kissed Toya's neck. He pulled sharply on his hardened nipples, and a cry escaped Toya. Hodaka was the same as ever.

"Nngh!"

His body responded even to this malicious stimulation and liquid welled up immediately, a trembling bead of anticipation.

Hodaka held the base of Toya's member loosely, and Toya choked.

"You're already hard, and yet you try to lie to me. Stop it. You're the despicable one here."

Toya hadn't expected Hodaka to treat him kindly, but it was underhanded to attack him with such cruelty. But he had no time to sulk over it. His body ached after the excitement of its quest for Hodaka, and Toya wrapped his legs around Hodaka's waist. Hodaka smiled vaguely at the sight.

"Do that with your mouth," he whispered.

That act usually filled Toya with petrifying hesitation, but today was different.

He drew his lips closer to Hodaka and took him into his mouth. Nurturing this thing that still showed no response with his own hands filled Toya with a fresh joy.

"Mmph."

He sucked on it, slurping from time to time.

Toya lost himself in the pleasure of servicing Hodaka. He wanted to draw out his pleasure and make him his own. He wanted to feel connected to Hodaka.

"It tastes so good," Toya murmured, raising his head to look up at Hodaka. He ran his hand over it soothingly, and it grew visibly in size.

Toya wouldn't have minded if Hodaka shoved it deeper down his throat, but Hodaka was gentle.

"That's enough. Come here."

Hodaka's arrogant order excited Toya. He straddled Hodaka, who leaned against the backboard of the bed, and slowly lowered his hips onto him.

Toya lacked practice, but his lust to connect with Hodaka took control.

"Ah!"

Hodaka took hold of Toya's hips, not allowing him to pull away. His hands only rested against his skin, but the delusion that the man wanted to be inside consumed Toya and he took Hodaka into his body, hot breath coming in heavy pants.

Stimulating his ready flesh to hurry it along, Hodaka thrust into him. Or perhaps Toya had guided his movement.

"Mm...mm!"

He was finally able to share his body with the man he had pursued. Just thinking about it filled him with satisfaction.

"You're so tight. Can't you loosen up a little?"

"But I'm—I'm—aah!"

"Don't answer me in words, Toya."

His excited organ rubbed against the man's

belly, feeling as if it might explode at any moment. But when his eyes fell on Hodaka, the man was smiling in amusement.

"You're so incredibly perverted. It must have been hard for you, waiting until today."

"Nn—it's—it's just...for you."

It was just that Toya had become more sensitive since falling in love. He wasn't as perverted as Hodaka said. All he was doing was experiencing the joy of letting himself be conquered by the man he loved, the joy of being swallowed up by him.

"I'm not so sure. But you are so stubborn. I think you can hold on a while longer."

Hodaka really was a bully. He knew exactly what to do to excite Toya, exactly how to insult him to bring him to his knees. He knew that Toya still hadn't embraced his perversion, still hesitated, and he reveled in it.

He had taken everything from Toya, this cruel, mean-spirited, despicable man.

But without him, Toya would have nothing.

"Ah—ahh!"

Hodaka held fast to Toya's hips, pulling him up and down. Toya's body trembled at this slight touch. He was ashamed of how excited he was becoming. But Toya lost the means to keep control as his innards were rubbed, driving him closer.

"Deep—go deep..."

"Here?"

"Nngh! Yes! There!"

The motions that before had brought only a

feeling of pressure now gave Toya nothing but pleasure.

"Sir—oh, sir—please—" Toya buried his face in Hodaka's shoulder, struggling to resist the wave that threatened to sweep him away. A constant stream of words, choked-off and panting, flowed out of him.

"Is it that good?"

"I'm dying," Toya whimpered, his hips rocking constantly as his supple legs clung desperately to the man's body. He dug his fingertips into Hodaka's back, leaving a furrow in his skin. He wouldn't be able to bear this luscious torture otherwise.

"Quick—please!"

He couldn't say it, but he wanted Hodaka to feel this, too; to experience his own body and drown in the excitement it offered him. He wanted him to sink into his body, to never stop falling deeper...

"You should...enjoy it, too—ah! Nngh!"

As if he'd guessed Toya's wish, he pounded into Toya's body, obscenely noisy. He whispered in Toya's ear.

"That's the first time I've ever heard something so considerate. Here's your reward," Hodaka whispered as he fondled Toya's penis. At the same moment, he put pressure on Toya's weakest spot, bombarding him.

Toya gasped and climaxed at this lightest of caresses. He clamped down on Hodaka, still inside him. The next moment, Hodaka's fluids filled Toya.

But he couldn't be content with only that. He hungered still.

"Again. Take everything you can," Toya whispered rapturously, still locked together with

Hodaka, the two now fallen on top of each other. He could feel Hodaka inside him, still hard enough to do it, and he knew Hodaka could make him scream.

He wanted to be penetrated, to be hollowed out, to be held until he fell apart.

“I love you...so much.”

Hodaka looked at Toya as he made this passionate declaration and smiled more tenderly than ever before.

That was the smile that Toya wanted so badly to see.

When Toya awoke from a shallow doze and saw Hodaka lying beside him, he smiled.

Toya had managed to keep control over his body, never drowning in his lust, and in the end they had fallen asleep in each other's arms.

“Sir...”

Toya whispered “I love you” in a tiny voice and rubbed his cheek on Hodaka's chest. Hodaka's skin was slightly damp, but it felt good.

Toya had thrown everything away, but he had experienced a love so powerful that he was glad to lose everything for it.

Toya had chased Hodaka despite the pain it caused others, despite the betrayal, and that guilt haunted him. But if Hodaka was with him, he wouldn't be afraid to bear the burden of guilt.

“What's wrong? Are you having trouble sleeping?”



Hodaka awoke and laid a hand on Toya's side, drawing his body toward him.

If Toya told him that he'd just wanted to touch him, Hodaka would probably laugh. Pushing aside those naïve ideas, Toya asked, "When are you going back to Tokyo, sir? You have a schedule to keep, and I'd like to discuss some aspects of the project with you if possible."

"Can it wait till I get tired of having sex with you?"

"If that's how you feel, I'm afraid I'll have to head back now with the manuscript."

"You're no fun," Hodaka laughed and pressed a gentle kiss against his cheek. "Well, I'm going to help myself to another round before I let you go."

Sensing the raw, masculine lust in Hodaka's low voice and Toya sucked in a breath instinctively.

But it was too late to escape it. He didn't even want to try. Toya desired Hodaka more than he could ever fulfill.

Hodaka bent over Toya and stretched him out on the bed, pressing his lips against his.

"If you leave, I'll be lonely."

"What—?"

"I prefer to have you with me than to be alone."

Toya's breath caught in surprise at this sudden confession and he stared up at the man who held him pinned.

"I suppose that's what love is."

Toya pushed away the emotions threatening to make him cry, and reached up to put his arms around

Hodaka's neck.

"I think it is."

He would never let go of this man. He would never leave him again.

Hodaka had convinced him: Toya simply sank into the deep well of his desire, exactly as Hodaka had wanted.

Toya loved him. He would have committed any sin in order to make Hodaka his. He hadn't done anything wrong when he'd drowned in this passion; the crime was falling into the trap of his profound love.

And he hadn't done it alone: he had been Hodaka's partner in crime.

But all Toya wanted right now was to touch Hodaka.

He would be happy just to sink into the joy of sensation and the warmth of Hodaka's body.

The Guilty

The Fruit of His Happiness

Toya's body felt heavy. He felt strangely feverish. Moving was a lost cause. But still Toya Sakurai tossed in bed, though he was reluctant to move even that much.

When he felt something cool on his forehead, he opened his eyes listlessly.

"Toya."

The man's sweet, serene voice tickled Toya's eardrums. An obscure doll-like figure entered his field of vision, as if a thick film lay over his eyes, before the image finally sharpened.

"Sir."

"You've got a fever. How do you feel?" Kai Hodaka, one of the authors Toya managed, was gazing intently down at him, looking unusually concerned.

Eventually Toya realized that he was in the master bedroom of Hodaka's apartment, and he blushed reflexively. Someone had dressed him in Hodaka's pajamas. He must have been in pretty bad shape, since he had apparently slept through it.

Several days had flown by since they'd come back from Hodaka's mansion in Hayama, where Toya's life had turned upside down.

Toya had returned to work as usual. In order to

pay back some of the time he lost by staying in Hayama, he'd had to give up some of his vacation days. He remembered falling asleep while talking with Hodaka, but he hadn't felt like he was developing a fever.

"I'm fine. I'm just a little hot."

Hodaka stopped Toya as he tried to get up, looking down at him with a slight frown. "Are you sick?"

"I don't think so. Things have been so hectic lately with all the proofreading. Maybe I'm just tired from that," Toya said dully.

Hodaka gave a perfunctory response, watching over Toya uneasily. "Do you want some cold medicine? I'm sure I have some, and if not, I can go to the store."

"No, I'm fine!" Toya hurriedly shook his head. He wasn't about to make Hodaka run around in the middle of the night looking for medicine.

"Then is there anything I can get you?"

"I can't think of anything." As soon as he answered, Toya's stomach gurgled noisily. Toya turned bright red, and Hodaka chuckled.

"You're starving."

"Well, I guess. A little."

Toya had come straight to Hodaka's apartment after leaving the office, and he'd been too busy to eat anything. When he'd arrived, Hodaka was already drinking whiskey. Toya was too embarrassed to ask if he'd eaten, so he'd just poured beers into his empty stomach.

Everything after that was a blank.

"Would you like something to eat, then?"

Toya didn't care what he ate, as long as it felt good and refreshing going down. But he couldn't give Hodaka such a vague request. Porridge was standard fare for sick people, but Toya knew that cooking was not Hodaka's strong suit. He remembered the not-quite salad he had made, throwing raw vegetables together on a plate.

"Do you just have an apple or some kind of fruit?" Toya asked.

"I think I have some apples."

"Then I'll have that. You can leave the skin on, just wash it first."

"Even I know how to peel an apple. I'll be right back." Hodaka smiled and patted Toya's hair, then left the room.

Toya's heart squeezed tight at the bizarre consideration Hodaka was showing. He was acting exactly like a boyfriend, making all these sweet gestures. He had confessed his feelings to Hodaka and they had slept together. But it still didn't seem real that Hodaka could feel the same way.

Toya had no idea what to do with himself, scorched by fever and embarrassment, and as he lounged in bed, a thought struck him.

Does Hodaka really know how to peel an apple?

His hunger had dulled his mind, and though he had just entrusted Hodaka with this task, he had trouble believing his brave words. Toya was worried about Hodaka now. He tried to get out of bed, but his mind was blurred by the fever obscuring it and he found it difficult

to stand. In his condition, there was nothing he could do but wait patiently for Hodaka to come back.

He strained his ears and thought he could hear something in the kitchen downstairs, but the apartment was well sound-proofed, so he couldn't be sure.

Toya gave up and burrowed back into the covers. Just as he was drifting into sleep, the bedroom door opened tentatively. Toya opened his puffy eyes to look up at it and saw Hodaka coming over to him carrying a tray.

"Here."

"Thank you, sir."

Toya sat up, picking up a round plate and the dessert fork that lay beside it. He thought the thing on the plate looked pretty strange for an apple, but he shrugged it off, deciding that his fever was distorting his vision. Toya picked a piece up with his fork, but his hand paused instinctively at the unusual smell of the fruit.

"What's wrong?"

"This—it's not really an apple, is it?"

Hodaka didn't answer. His face tightened momentarily, then he looked over at Toya.

"Is it a pear?"

"Not bad. It's a La France pear."

"What?!" It didn't take much to tell a La France pear from an apple.

"Someone gave me some La France pears, and they were sitting in the fridge next to the apples. I didn't notice I'd picked up the wrong one until I'd peeled it."

"But how could you not tell them apart?"

"It was dark. One of the lights in the kitchen

is broken." Toya's interrogation was starting to upset Hodaka enough to make up excuses.

If he just glanced at the pear quickly, it might have passed for a Granny Smith apple, but the smell and the shape were totally different.

But Kai Hodaka was the sort of person who could confuse the two.

The fruit was cut up into small squares, so Toya knew that Hodaka had put a lot of effort into it. He couldn't believe this was the same Kai Hodaka going to so much trouble for him. "I hope you didn't cut yourself."

"I can manage that much."

"I'm glad to hear it. Mm, this is really good."

The pear was delicious with its crisp texture and mellow sweetness, and it slid delightfully down Toya's throat.

Toya burst out laughing happily as a smile played over Hodaka's lips. "Really?"

"You should try some, sir. It's just ripe enough."

"I guess I'll take a bite as my reward."

Hodaka sat on the edge of the bed and twisted his body toward Toya. He passed his arm behind Toya's head and drew him against his body.

"Oh!"

There was no time to stop the fruit from spilling off the plate as Hodaka captured his lips. True to his word, Hodaka tasted Toya, licking his top and bottom lips, then running his tongue across his teeth. After the intricate dance of his tongue over Toya's gums, Hodaka

pushed his mouth open and moved past his teeth.

"Mm—nngh!"

"You're so hot," Hodaka murmured as he explored every corner of Toya's mouth: the soft flesh on the insides of his cheeks, the roof of his mouth, behind his gums. But Toya's tongue struck out at Hodaka first, licking him, as if it was fed up with being ignored. He knew Hodaka was laughing at him for his impatience.

Their kiss ended, Hodaka took the tray from Toya's hands and set it on the nightstand.

"Mm—" The air stuck in Toya's throat escaped him in a quiet moan as he wrapped his arms around Hodaka's neck, begging him for more and more kisses. Toya knew that, rationally, they shouldn't be kissing like this, but Hodaka's kisses made him feel so good that he couldn't stop himself.

Hodaka pulled away from a long kiss, finally releasing Toya, whose cheeks were pink from it. Powerless, Toya flopped onto Hodaka's shoulder. Hodaka stroked his back tenderly. "It was delicious."

"The pear?"

"Your mouth."

How could Hodaka say such things even at a time like this? Toya couldn't tell if he was serious or just posturing. This was another aspect of his genius, perhaps.

"But if I stay here, you won't be able to sleep. Can't I stay in the other bedroom?"

"No, I don't mind. I'm the one who brought you here in the first place."

Toya tried to protest. Hodaka had a guest room

in his apartment, but he wouldn't be moving there: he'd be stealing the master bedroom.

"This one's bigger, anyway, and it's easier to move around in the bed."

"But that's just it—"

Toya came dangerously close to being too honest in his protests, and quickly cut himself off. Hodaka pursued him, looking puzzled. "What were you going to say?"

"This room is too big. It makes me feel lonely." Maybe it was his fever. He didn't usually express his feelings this easily.

"You don't like being alone?"

"It's not my favorite thing. Do you like it?"

"Haven't you ever told someone 'I'd be nothing without you'?"

Through the joking veneer, Toya felt like he caught a glimpse of Hodaka's real feelings.

"Mister Hodaka," Toya sighed and wrapped his arms around the man's neck once more. "I want you to help me...lower my fever."

"How?"

"Well, if you just...wipe the sweat away, I should feel better."

Even Toya blushed at this clichéd pretense, but Hodaka merely chuckled. "I will do as you bid of me," Hodaka whispered as he began to slowly unbutton Toya's pajamas. He pressed his lips against the bared skin, and a sweet ache commanded Toya's entire body.

"Ah! Mm—ahh!"

It must have been his fever that was causing him

to react so strongly to simple kisses raining down on his skin. The signals that Hodaka gave him stimulated his nerves directly, traveling instantly to Toya's other five senses.

His body tensed in a matter of moments.

"You're quick," Hodaka murmured.

"Is that—bad?"

"No, I love how easy you are to get off, Toya."

Toya felt as if his entire body had thrilled with excitement at the man's gentle whisper. Hodaka's voice enchanted Toya more than anything, igniting his passion with its tones of simultaneous concern and depravity.

Not a stitch of clothing remained to cover Toya now, and the uninhibited caresses Hodaka lavished on his penis intoxicated him. He was at Hodaka's mercy. All he could do was gasp.

"Nngh—sir! Please—"

Toya writhed under the sensation of a finger exploring his puckered flesh, covered in gel. Waiting already for stimulation, the folds of skin greeted Hodaka's movements, flush with mounting passion.

"Please what? Do you want me inside? Or do you want me to make you come?"

"Nngh. Go—go in—"

Toya hadn't noticed Hodaka take hold of him while he voiced his desire. He wanted Hodaka to share the pleasure he felt as soon as possible. It was the only thing he craved.

"Sir, I want you—to have it—too—"

"All right."

Toya saw a film of sweat shining on Hodaka's

forehead, a fact which surprised him.

Hodaka put a pillow under Toya's hips to raise them slightly, then hooked both Toya's legs over his arms. He pushed his manhood against Toya's eager bud of flesh, and Toya gasped. They had done this several times, but Toya was still not used to it. This time, he wanted to reward Hodaka's kindness.

Toya wriggled his hips, making a conscious effort.

"You don't need to be in such a hurry."

"I—I want more—"

"You're covered in sweat. Are you sure this is going to help your fever?"

Impossible. Having sex with Hodaka would make Toya's brain boil.

But he was far too embarrassed to tell him that and, nodding ambiguously, Toya held Hodaka's body tightly against him.

The next morning, Toya awoke in high spirits and went to the bathroom as soon as he woke up to wash his face. Hodaka was nowhere to be seen and, suspecting that he was in the kitchen, Toya started to go downstairs in his pajamas. A dull ache inside his body stopped him.

But it wasn't unpleasant: on the contrary, relief and satisfaction flooded Toya's heart.

The smell of coffee drifted up from the kitchen, and Toya went to investigate.

"Good morning," Toya called out to Hodaka, who stood at the sink with his back to him. Hodaka

turned around and returned the greeting.

“Morning.”

Toya was about to ask what he was making when the sight of the plate set out on the counter shocked him into silence.

There were peeled apples on the plate—a mountain of them.

“Sir, what are you—?”

“I’ve been practicing, in case you ever say you want apples again.”

“Thank you, but—”

Toya had no idea how many apples Hodaka had peeled, but—he appreciated it

“We can’t waste them, though. We have to eat all of these soon. If you soak them in salt water they won’t turn brown as quickly.”

Maybe there were enough apples to make jam out of them.

“Okay.”

Hodaka was perfect in every single way, but at that moment Toya realized that somewhere inside Hodaka was a man who didn’t like numbers and calculations.

I want to know everything that’s inside you.

Toya brought an apple to his mouth as this thought passed through his mind. They would probably get sick of eating apples before they’d finished working through this pile, but that was all right with him.

Toya felt a simple but extraordinary happiness at the thought that he wouldn’t mind if he never ate apples again.

THE GUILTY

Vol.2

Original Sin

Winter 2009

Postscript

Hello, I'm Katsura Izumi.

I want to thank you for choosing this reissued edition of *The Guilty*.

This book was initially a pulp novel and I never imagined it would be published as a real paperback. When they told me, I was overjoyed.

This series—*The Guilty*, I mean—was the first time I ever tried my hand at explicit sex scenes.

It was so exhilarating writing this story, but I remember being very nervous before it went on sale, wondering what I would do if you readers didn't like it. I remember that feeling like it was yesterday.

Amazingly, they told me they wanted a second volume, so my dream of writing a series was granted. But that was only the beginning: they also recorded a dramatized version of the book, so this story is very memorable for me.

The original got a little tune-up at the time of the reissue and we also added a short story I wrote for it.

When *The Guilty* was made into a drama CD

recently, as mentioned above, I reread it again and again. I read it with such a strangely fresh feeling, and I felt like I would be embarrassed to talk to my old self.

I've been looking forward to writing the short story, so I tried to give it a slightly sweeter flavor. In the timeline, it happens between *The Guilty: Precious Love* (included with volume four) and the second volume of the series. Incidentally, the story originated in real events, something that I accidentally did myself. When I told a friend what happened, she said, "How could you not tell them apart?" and I became the inspiration for my own story. But really, I think it's hard to tell them apart in the dark...(laugh)

I believe that they will continue publishing the rest of the series in paperback, so I'd love it if you picked them up. And I'd love it if you could listen to *The Guilty* on CD, too. Now that I can actually say those words, I feel such power...it scares me a little bit.

Hinako Takanaga has provided a gorgeous cover for the reissue! It's wonderful to see Hodaka and Toya together again. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to do it!

I want to express my thanks also to the editing team who did so much to help me.

And I want to express my deep gratitude to all the readers who have been kind enough to choose this book. I would be thrilled if you decided to read the rest

of the series, too.

Hope to see you in the next book!

Katsura Izumi

* For information about professional and unofficial publications, please check the site:

<http://www.k-izumi.jp/>



Congratulations on the reissue of *The Guilty*, Miss Izumi! I feel lucky to have been involved in the illustrations again. I hope I managed to help you imagine the world of Miss Izumi's novel a little bit better.



I get stressed out when I draw for other people's stories without any instructions. If it were my own book, I could draw whatever I wanted and I would deserve whatever I got, but I'm always on edge, making sure my pen doesn't slip even a tiny bit for other people. I was completely lost about what to draw here, too. But to be honest, I decided that since Mister Hodaka is right smack in the middle of this story and he never takes his clothes off, I would try stripping him. (My pen was slipping a lot when I did it.) I felt really guilty about doing this to someone else's character, so—Miss Izumi—please forgive me! I just wanted to see Mister Hodaka naked. I'm sorry. But when things get dirty, it's a lot hotter that way than when he keeps his clothes on. (Agh! I can't believe I just said that.)

In one of Mister Hodaka's last lines, there's an implication that he got into some real trouble, maybe he practically drank himself into a coma, though Toya wasn't involved. But I don't need to tell all of you that, since you've just finished reading the book. So I'm going to stop here. Besides, this is starting to sound like a fan letter. How embarrassing—I just noticed.



I want to thank Miss Izumi and my editor for being so patient with me. Hopefully we'll be able to work together again. Thanks for everything.

Hinako Takanaga